

# Ghosts of Erebus

by ChucklesTheClown

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Summary: Not all Spartans play by the rules. When a mysterious weapon is lost on the penal planet Erebus, a special group of hardedged Spartans are sent to retrieve it. But they haven't been told the whole story, and soon realize they were given a oneway ticket

## 1. Default Chapter

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><strong>Ghosts of Erebus: Prologue<strong>

\* \* \*

><strong><em>September 18, 2544. Somewhere in New Afghanistan<em>\*\*

They tried not to walk on the body parts, but that proved impossible. Two thousand men had been slaughtered in an area no larger than a soccer field, turning the ground red and transforming a beautiful valley into a nightmare. Fear hung over them like a poison cloud, and as they suffocated they trembled. Even after seven years of war, they had never seen anything this horrific.

But that wasn't why they trembled.

Desperation made for quick work, and in less than an hour they had located both bodies. But not all time is counted in seconds and minutes: sometimes it is measured in lives. Five soldiers driven mad by fear had been shot as they tried to desert. By the next morning seven had committed suicide, and over half needed chemical sedation to relax. Two days after they returned to base, the commanding officer was murdered as he slept.

The dead soldiers were mourned, but not the slain officer. Colonel Solotov had willingly led them to that place: Colonel

Solotov could rot in Hell.

\* \* \*

><em><strong>September 31, 2544. Bishkek, Capitol of New Afghanistan<strong>\_

Iosif and Anatoly were his last hope, and as he stood before the caskets that held their mangled bodies, Viktor Turpolev knew that hope was dead. After decisive victories in the first month of fighting, the war had been all but over. The Bishkek Rebellion had seemed destined for victory. \_That was then\_. Now, his armies were deserting, his sons were dead, and all too soon the flag that adorned their coffins would be no more. The Bishkek Rebellion would fail and United Asia would pass into history.

It had begun with such promise, back in May of 2537. As Commander of a third of the United Nations' earthbound forces, Turpolev had quietly won the allegiance of nearly every top officer in Asia. Like him, they were weary of UN control. In establishing a sovereign state in Asia they would both win autonomy and establish a viable check to the UN's growing power.

His plan was as brilliant as it was cruel.

During a massive joint training operation, Turpolev made his move. In a merciless surprise attack upon his fellow UN forces, he all but obliterated every military installation within a thousand miles of the borders of Asia. After only a month the UN was forced to the negotiating table. Talks dragged on for over a year as minor fighting continued.

Finally, in the fall of 2538, the UN made it's final offer. It stated that United Asia would be recognized as a sovereign state "on the condition that it demonstrates complete control of its territories by January 1, 2545." All competing armies and leaders must be put down by that date or the UN would regain control of Asia by "any means necessary."

Baited with easy victory and the promise of great power, Turpolev signed the agreement too willingly. Blinded by the cordial talks, smiling faces and pleasant ceremony, he failed to discern what was really happening: that even as the UN signed the treaty with it's right hand, it summoned the Devil with it's left.

\* \* \*

><em><strong>October 18, 2538. Wilderness of Moshe, 200 miles south of Bishkek, New Afghanistan<strong>\_

"I think I see something . . ." Sasha lowered his Pelican for a better look as he reported to Captain Singh, two hundred miles north in Bishkek. Just two days before an entire division had vanished as it headed north to the Capitol. Since the UNSC had long since destroyed the rebellion's few satellites, every available Pelican was searching the huge area. "I don't know . . . it looks like slaughtered sheep, maybe. Wait . . . oh no. Oh my God! Ohâ€" Singh winced as the sound of vomiting filled his ears. "Sir . . . I-I think we found them. \_My God\_."

Rescue teams arrived within minutes, but the vultures merely glanced and the dead paid no notice at all. The would-be rescuers stared in numb horror. Strewn across the valley before them was a scene belched out of Hell. That the entire division had been killed was readily apparent. But they knew, they \_all\_ knew, what had happened here was more than killing. Not a single body had been left in one piece, and that was a message for the living, not the dead. These soldiers looked as if they had been torn apart by the gods, and the gods were angry; the gods were vengeful. This was more than killingâ€”this was retribution.

Best they could tell, the division had been ambushed by no more than \_two\_ attackers. Thousands of heavily armed men had not just been beaten, but torn to pieces, by only a couple of soldiers? What's more, something strange had been scratched on top of two burned out vehicles. Language experts concluded that it was an ancient symbol meaning "Clown". But nobody was laughing.

Unexplained massacres and disappearances became commonplace, sowing fear into the heart of the rebellion. Soon the word "clown" became synonymous with "death".

\* \* \*

><strong>THE FOLLOWING IS WHAT REMAINS OF A LETTER FOUND ON THE CHARRED CORPSE OF A SOLDIER IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF NEW AFGHANISTAN<strong>

\_ . . because just a few minutes ago we saw the symbol scratched into some trees by the road. Men are beginning to go mad from the fear. It is like nothing I've felt before. I can hardly hold a pen. They usually cut them down before . . . is the territory that "they" operate in, and our CO is a fool to bring us in here. The madman has decided to stay here for the night. There it is again. I have never seen the "Clown" symbol close up before. Oh God. Men are losing, control, running into the woods screaming. Some mad fool is firing a weapon. Tell Alina I love her.\_

\* \* \*

>As the years passed and the UN deadline approached, officers were under terrific pressure from their superiors to find and eliminate the Clowns. Yet soldiers ordered into known "Clown" territory were as likely to kill their commander as obey. This tension destroyed morale throughout the rebel forces, and by late 2544 only two Generals could control fear and men enough to pursue the Clowns: Turpolev's sons, Iosif and Anatoly.<p><p>

Together they led a handpicked group of soldiers deep into Clown controlled area. A few days into the operation a short radio communication reported that the Clowns had been located. A week later, Viktor Turpolev stood in front of two impressive coffins, each draped with the flag of his failing state. He harbored no more hope for a country of his own. His hope lay burned and mangled in the boxes before him.

For years he had wondered who or what the Clowns were, but now finding out became an obsession. They had murdered his sonsâ€”\_his sons\_. Be they wild animals or the Titans of Greek myth, they would

see his face before they died. Iosif and Anatoly had burned alive as they sat in the command vehicle. His sons had suffered enormous pain.

The Clowns would suffer much, much worse.

C.T. Clown

## 2. Postcards from Hell

**\*\*Ghosts of Erebus (part two): Postcards from Hell\*\***

\* \* \*

><strong><em>Fall of 2552â€"Seven years after the defeat of the Bishkek Rebellion<em>\*\*

The pilot's eyes registered mirth, then pain and finally nothing, as his last breath flowed warm and moist over David's face. Cryo-sleep never failed to give the young intelligence officer bad dreams, but this nightmare had begun after he awoke.

Only a few minutes earlier David Sagus had arrived on the small ship's bridge full of excitement. Although he was born and raised on Earth, he had not been there since joining the Office of Naval Intelligence six years earlier. He was eager to lay eyes on his home again, but the planet that filled the screen before him was not Earth. Not even close.

Warrant officer Sam Charon, the only other soul on the small ship, spun around in his chair. "Good morning Lieutenant Sagus. Sleep well?"

David walked forward, shaking his head in confusion. "Umm . . . no, not really. Where are we?"

Pulling a gun from his belt and aiming it at the Lieutenant's face, Charon replied, "Hell, Sagus. We're in Hell." Rising slowly, he approached the stunned officer. A twisted smile crawled across his face, followed by soft chuckling. Whatever he was going to do, he was going to enjoy it.

"I've got a couple of questions for you, sir. If I like what you say, I might keep you alive. Refuse, and I'll blow your desk-sitting-intelligence-puke brains out the back of your head. Got it?"

Sagus nodded.

Charon moved closer and pushed the gun hard into David's forehead, almost breaking the skin. "What's in the container you are transporting, and how do I open it?"

With blurring speed Sagus spun forward, putting himself beside the gun and his back to Charon. Grabbing the pilot's gun arm, he twisted down counter-clockwise with a single violent motion, loudly dislocating the shoulder. He then turned and jammed the weapon into the traitor's gut without ever removing it from his hand. The soldier screamed in agony.

"H-Howâ€" "

"Four years in Naval Special Forces, you pig. Now tell \_me\_ something, and if I like \_your \_answer I might just kill you anyway: who are you working for? WHO!?" A wicked smile began to spread across the pilot's face again, and by the time David realized why, it was too late.

BANG!

Somehow, even with his arm twisted into a bloody pretzel, the pilot had managed to pull the trigger and kill himself. Letting the corpse fall to the floor with disgust, Sagus checked the controls. He found the ship on autopilot, and the manual controls permanently disabled.

\_This guy was smarter than I thought.\_

Finding the navigation panel, he checked the coordinates. \_No, that can't be right\_. He shook his head in disbelief and checked again. Same answer.

"The pilot was right," he muttered to himself, "we're in Hell."

\* \* \*

>When the Bishkek rebellion was finally defeated in 2545, the UN found itself with a new problem: What to do with the Clowns?<p><p>

Back in 2537, Turpolev had announced his betrayal by attacking his fellow UN soldiers without warning or mercy. Nearly a million men had been slaughtered in a single day, and the UN had determined from the beginning that this great atrocity would not be rewarded, but punished. Once it became clear that an attack of sheer force would be too costly in both lives and equipment, they approached Naval Special Forces with the possibility of using Spartans. The Navy said that they could only spare two of their renowned super-soldiers. UN officials said that wouldn't be enough.

But they had never met \_these \_Spartans.

Ordered not just to kill, but also to make it as horrific and messy as possible, they instantly exceeded all expectations. Photos of the Spartan's first attack on the rebels were dubbed "postcards from Hell". As one General remarked, it was like color pictures of Little Bighornâ€"only much, much worse.

Several years passed before the UN learned that the rebels referred to the Spartans as "The Clowns." Apparently the two of them had come up with a "calling card" symbol that they left at the scene of their attacks. By scratching it into trees and rocks over a huge area they could both instill fear and make it seem as if they were everywhere at once. More than one officer had been killed by his own men after seeing the symbol and refusing to turn back.

The UN commanders were amused to find out that the symbol was supposed to be that of the mythical "Grim Reaper", but the Spartans were not as good at drawing as they were at killing. That might have

been for the best: by the end of the war the Grim Reaper, be he real or imagined, held no terror compared to the Clowns. The Reaper symbolized death. The Clowns reflected man's greatest fears, bringing to life horror to which childhood nightmares paledâ€”the Clowns symbolized Hell.

After the war, the UN realized that the great and horrible success of the Clowns must never become public knowledge. Some things, even things done in the cause of good, cannot be set aside, accepted or forgotten. The Clowns had single-handedly prevented a world-wide civil warâ€”but slaughtering bug-eyed aliens was one thing while butchering human beings was quite another. In the end it was decided that the Clowns would be eliminated, lest the truth get out and the UN's reputation be damaged.

Apparently they had learned nothing from the war.

\* \* \*

>Colonel Ackerson was not contacted until the UN had lost over a thousand men trying to kill the Clowns. He was all too willing to help, but not in the way they thought. He would take care of the two rogue Spartans; in fact, he would adopt them.<p><p>

For years Ackerson had tried to put Naval Special Forces on a better footing to fight the Covenant, only to see the needed funding sponged up by the ridiculous SPARTAN program. Somehow his superiors at ONI thought it wiser to equip a handful of Spartans than the millions in Special Forces. Deprived of needed technological improvements, his best soldiers were being slaughtered by the Covenant as though they were fresh from boot camp. Something had to be done, and sooner rather than later.

He snatched up the Clowns and established the \_\*\*S\*\*partan \*\*A\*\*dvanced \*\*T\*\*raining \*\*U\*\*nit\_. Finding that the SPARTAN program was more expansive and less organized than he had thought, he began secretly recruiting Spartans into SATU. The lure? They would do nothingâ€”\_nothing\_â€”but war games, day in, day out. The catch? They would use \_only\_ live ammunition. This was essential, because the goal at SATU was not learning how to fight and kill the Covenant, but how to fight and kill fellow Spartans without remorse or hesitation.

Of all the Spartans in the unit, only the Clowns, Lexicus and Chuckles, guessed what they were being trained for. With both of them harboring moral reservations about the methods used to "create" Spartans, and convinced by Ackerson that Dr. Halsey herself had told the UN to eliminate them at the end of the war, they reluctantly agreed to head the unit.

**\*\*AUTHOR'S NOTE\*\***: FOR MORE ON S.A.T.U. AND ACKERSON'S PLAN TO USE IT TO DESTROY THE SPARTAN PROGRAM, SEE MY IMISSION FROM SATU/I SERIES, WHERE ACKERSON ACTUALLY EXECUTES THIS PLAN. KEEP IN MIND, THOUGH, THAT THE TWO STORIES ARE NOT MEANT TO MESH PERFECTLY

By 2552, after six years of hard, bloody work, Ackerson finally had the team he neededâ€”only to have it all destroyed by one phone call.

Something horrible had happened, and his Clowns were needed again.

\* \* \*

>Lexicus and Chuckles felt like they were on display in a zoo. The Admiral sitting opposite them had never seen the infamous "Clowns" and he was staring. Chuckles found himself wishing he had stayed in his MJOLNIR armor. Ackerson, who was sitting to the left of the Admiral, spoke first.<p><p>

"Soldiers, this is Admiral Thomas Kraft. He's here, frankly, because something has gone very wrong. Due to mechanical problems, a Naval Officer, Lieutenant David Sagus, had to ditch his ship on a planet during an urgent trip to Earth. He was carrying something very important with him."

"What?" Lexicus asked.

Speaking for the first time, the Admiral said, "Something \_very\_ important. That is all you need to know, soldier."

"Quite simply," Ackerson continued, "we need you to retrieve both the officer and his cargo."

Chuckles was incredulous. "What's the catch? Why us instead of regular SAR?"

"Because of where he landed" Ackerson replied. "It is a prison planet called Erebus." The name, another word for \_Hell\_ in Greek mythology, caused the Clowns to chuckle. "Four years ago a transport sent to Erebus did not return. Rescuers were sent, but they also disappeared. We cut our losses, and restricted all travel in that area."

After an uncomfortable silence Ackerson leaned forward, and the look on his face chilled the two Spartans. It was a look of warning. "Soldiers, no matter \_what\_ happens, complete your mission. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir." He was trying to tell them something, and whatever it was, it bought him a damning look from his superior.

"Dismissed."

Once the Spartans had left the room, the Admiral spoke. "Don't play games with me, Ackerson. Botch this mission and I'll have you fighting Covenant with a dinner knife and a body bag strapped to your back!"

Ackerson turned, leveling an icy gaze at his superior. "Sir, do you have any idea who you're screwing with? If those two find out that we lied to them, there won't be enough of us left to \_put\_ in a body bag."

Admiral Kraft replied derisively, "They're not coming back."

"Yeah? I have some postcards I'd like to show you, sir. Care to join me for lunch?"

The food at the OC was exceptional, as usual, but the Admiral didn't eat a thing on his plate. Strange thing too: spaghetti and meatballs were his favorite meal.

C.T. Clown

### 3. Beautiful, Silent Madness

**\*\*Ghosts of Erebus (part three): Beautiful, Silent Madness\*\***

Some are driven mad by it. Those who have never heard cannot imagine. Those who have will try anything to forget. \_But there is no forgetting.\_ A horror to the good, a joy to the evil, it begins among the living, and ends where it belongsâ€”in the halls of the dead. It is a cry, a scream, a shriek. It is the sound, the horrible, involuntary squeal of a man at the moment of slaughter. No utterance is more evil, for it is ever the company of death and murder.

Have you been to Erebusâ€”where such cries went up continuously for twenty-seven days? Where the living are insane, and the dead outnumber the living? Where the mass graves are so immense that they can be viewed from space? Have you been to Erebusâ€”have you been to Hell?

ONI has.

Of all the skeletons in its closetâ€”and there were manyâ€”Erebus was the biggest, and you did not have to place your ear on the door to hear it stirring. No, its hideous cry of death was getting louder, and the door could not contain it forever. ONI's sins would soon overtake them, and irony would get a curtain call: for it would happen in Hell, and ONI's name was on the deed.

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Lieutenant Scott Carion felt his stomach tighten, and although the temperature was a comfortable sixty-eight degrees, he was sweating. As he stood in the shuttle bay of the UNSC \_Cerberus\_ he fought to remain calm. But neither his rank nor the sixty Marines who surrounded him could keep his heart from racingâ€”and small wonder: the Clowns had just arrived. Admiral Kraft had told him to meet the Spartans and waste no time "establishing his authority."

\_Yeah, right.\_

The Pelican's ramp lowered, and the Spartans disembarked. Walking directly to the Lieutenant they snapped a crisp salute. "Reporting for duty, sir." The young officer almost fell over.

"Aren't there supposed to be \_two\_ of you?" Carion asked, unconsciously wiping sweat from his forehead.

"I brought as many men as I needed to accomplish my mission," Lexicus stated flatly. Turning around to survey the five Spartans standing behind him and then looking back at the nervous officer, he added, "Is there a problem sir?"

Carion did his best to speak with authority. "I'm sorry soldier, but I have orders to allow only \_two\_ Spartans on this ship. Four of you will have to leave. Warrant officer Anderson canâ€”"



"Nobody is going back, sir."

A murmur ran through the Marines, and they shifted uneasily. Junior officers were notoriously easy to rankle, and they had no interest in fighting six Spartans.

Surprised and somehow strengthened by the sudden insubordination, the officer spoke as he would to a private. "What was that soldier?!"

"With all due respect, sir," Lexicus replied in an icy voice, "we \_will\_ remain aboard this cruiserâ€"every last one of us."

Carion was livid. "I don't want to use force, soldierâ€"

"â€"and I wouldn't recommend it," Chuckles said, laughing. "If you're done talking tough, would you please get out of our way? Unless you \_are\_ going to try and put us back in the Pelican?" Chuckles lifted his hands, palms up, as if waiting for an answer. The young officer's lips moved, but made no sound. Chuckles continued. "In that case, why don't you show us to our accommodations, \_sir\_."

Without speaking a word the shamed Lieutenant turned and led them through the ship.

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Captain Robert Addy couldn't believe his ears. "My God, there are \_six\_ of them?!" He hadn't realized he'd yelled until he looked up and saw everyone on the bridge staring. Lowering his voice, he continued. "And you let them on the ship, Lieutenant? No, no, it doesn't change a thing. Got their names? Good."

The Captain muttered an expletive under his breath as he closed the channel. Not only was he headed for Erebus, but he also had more Spartans on board than he had plannedâ€"each a potential enemy. Looking at his young crew, he envied their calmâ€"a calm that he would not share until he returned safely to Earth. Of course, they all had something that he lacked: ignorance. To them Erebus was only a name, but to Captain Addy it was much more. He could still hear the cries . . . the inhuman screams.

"Sir? Are you okay?" Shaken from his thoughts, he looked up to see the concerned face of Lieutenant Sandie Gordon. "Sir, you're white as a sheet . . . and trembling. Let me call Dr. Volkner."

"No, but thank you Lieutenant. I'll be fine, and anyway, Volkner wouldn't be able to help."

\_Nobody  
would.\_

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The thick hood over his head blinded and almost suffocated him. Whatever they had stuck in his ears made it so that he could barely

even hear his own screams. All time seemed to run together, but he guessed that he was being tortured every few hours. It was always the same: something would be injected into his arm, and a few minutes later the nightmare would begin . . . again.

As far as he could tell, he had been cut, burned, electrocuted and, perhaps, operated on. How long had he been here? Days? Weeks? Months? At best, he was on the edge of sanity. David Sagus was tough, real tough, but he knew it was only a matter of time before he cracked. They had not yet asked any questionsâ€”but that was no surprise. They would wait until he was totally broken. \_Then\_ he would tell them everything and they would open the container he'd been entrusted with.

If that happened, he had only one prayer: that they would kill him \_before\_ they opened it.

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Erebus was roughly three times as far from Earth as the planet Reach, but due to an anomaly in slipspace it took about the same amount of time to get there: usually five or six days. Captain Addy spent his sleepless hours going over the CSV of each "extra" Spartan on his ship. If by some accident these super-soldiers learned the truth, he would need to know what he was dealing with. He had hoped knowing more about them would calm his nerves, but he had been mistaken. Lexicus had picked his team well.

He had already heard of Turpertrator. Towards the end of the Bishkek Rebellion the renowned Spartan had worked as an agitator in northern Asia: insurance in case the Clowns were lost. Like Lexicus and Chuckles, he had been part of the original group of Spartans. Turpertrator was famous among his peers for employing unique, unorthodox strategies that make his moves nearly impossible to predict. He bore watching every bit as much as the Clowns.

He had never heard of Mike, and after reading his CSV, that surprised him. Unbelievably, he was nearly a head taller and a hundred pounds heavier than the other five Spartans. Although he was known for incredible strength, it was his extraordinary technical prowess that set him apart. Given the present situation, this Spartan could prove the most troublesome.

Xraf and Rhinox represented a rarity among the Spartansâ€”they were brothers. Both of their CSV's showed style and ability surprisingly similar to the Clowns. Like Lexicus and Chuckles, they employed a deadly combination of brutal force and subtlety. A note from Ackerson stated that their considerable skills had not yet peaked.

Wonderful.

No matter. Soon the Spartans would be leaving his ship, and that would be the end of itâ€”he hoped.

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Nearly six days after leaving Earth, \_Cerberus\_ began its orbit of Erebus. Every available viewing screen on the sprawling cruiser had drawn a crowd, and as they gawked a stunned silence filled the ship. Shock and disbelief quickly replaced looks of curiosity.

\_It was beautiful.\_

It was as if . . . as if they had never left Earth's orbit. You had to look twice to realize that this was a distant planet, and not home. Gazing into their extra large viewing screen, the bridge crew was in awe. Clouds swirled across the globe in familiar patterns, ice capped the poles and oceans painted a brilliant blue between the continents. There was even a single moon, although it was less than half the size of Earth's. The more they looked, the more at home they felt. Smiling, they turned to see what the Captain thought.

But the Captain wasn't there; he was in the head vomiting. He didn't feel at home. No, he had never felt further away.

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Lexicus stood in the shuttle bay, observing his team. Something was wrong, but he couldn't figure out what it was. The gear was loaded, their suits were fully functional and Mike had spent several hours looking over their Pelican. Everything checked out; everything was good.

Then why did it feel so wrong?

Chuckles' voice crackled in Lex's helmet. "The crew is ready. I finally got that surface map we've been asking for. Quite a planet."

"Yes, it is," Lex replied, his voice uneasy. "Chuck, you remember that look Ackerson gave us when we were meeting with Admiral Kraft?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm starting to think that maybe we didn't take that warning seriously enough. Something is wrong, something big."

"Yeah, I agree, something is: our leader is getting spooked," Chuckles laughed. "Remembering \_any\_ look on Ackerson's face can give you a bad feeling. Forget about it. If something happens, we're prepared. And," Chuckles added in a serious voice, "if you start acting jumpy, it's going to affect the team. Let's stop worrying and focus on this mission."

"Yeah, you're right," Lexicus replied in a cheerless voice. "Get the team on the ship—let's get moving."

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Several minutes later their Pelican left the shuttle bay. ONI had

programmed coordinates into the auto-pilot for the approximate area that the intelligence officer had landed. Lexicus didn't care much for having a computer land his team, but orders were orders.

After coming through the upper atmosphere, the view from the Pelican was breathtaking. Soon they could discern far off mountains, large lakes, lush green-lands and pale deserts. For a moment Lex's unease lifted, sapped away by the expansive beauty. As they lost altitude the surface features began to emerge and it was clear that they would be landing just outside a city. Lexicus surveyed the LZ with his binocular vision and his unease returned. Something was down there . . . something that shouldn't be.

Dropping steadily, the Pelican flew towards a large, open square; and as the Spartans looked out the cockpit window, their blood ran cold. Filling the huge, concrete area from one side to the other, was a massive crowd of yelling, cheering soldiers. The dropship slowed, hovered briefly, and then gently touched down.

Beginning a few hundred yards in front of them, the sea of humanity began to part: someone important was coming. As the small entourage neared and their faces became clearer, Chuckles nearly stopped breathing. \_Oh my God.\_ It was all clear now. ONI \_had\_ sent them here in order to recover something, but this was no mission.

\_This was a trade.\_

Standing before their small ship was none other than Viktor Turpolev; founder and architect of the failed Bishkek Rebellion.

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Without turning his head, the ex-world leader spoke to his aide. "Do you believe me now, Krasky? There is nobody that ONI would not betray to fulfil its desires. That is why they are strong, my friend." Allowing himself a weak smile of satisfaction, he said, "Verify that they are indeed unarmed, and let the \_Cerberus\_ know that they may open the door."

"Open the door, sir?" Krasky said in disbelief. "These are the \_Clowns\_. Let us blow it up, let them burn."

"No!" Turpolev answered angrily, his head shaking in disgust. "They shall not die so quickly. By \_them\_ my country was destroyed and by \_their\_ hands my sons were killed. They will wish for death long before they die, and they will die looking at my face."

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Inside the Pelican, Lexicus spoke calmly. "Any luck, Mike?"

The burly Spartan spoke from under an access panel. "Lex, whoever did this it's a work of art. I'll need at least ten minutes to restore manual control." Moments earlier they had discovered that they had been supplied with bogus weapons. This was more good news.

"Too long. Any ideas guys?" Xraf began to speak, but was interrupted by a sound.

The ramp was lowering.

"I have an idea." Chuckles said as he pulled out his huge combat knife and smiled hideously beneath his helmet. Waving the blade towards the massive crowd outside the window he said, "I don't know how they got away the first time Lex, and I don't care: they're all here now." Then, in a voice of pure glee that surprised everyone but Lexicus he added, "Let's finish what we started in New Afghanistan."

C.T. Clown

#### 4. Tale of Two Tortures

**\*\*Ghosts of Erebus (part four): Tale of Two Tortures\*\***

Panic ripped into his guts like a starving dog and his knuckles shown white on the handle of his weapon—a weapon that seemed so very, very small and useless. Although primal fear screamed for him to open his eyes, Valentin Nikolaevich had been taught to pray with his eyes shut, and shut they remained . . . forever. An hour later they found him sprawled on the floor dead, facing away from the container he was supposed to be guarding.

It took two soldiers to pry the rifle out of his hands.

Some dark things dwell in the vastness of space that were never meant for the fragile hearts of men. Valentin would have told this to his comrades, but the dead are mute—and therein lies the paradox—for on Erebus \_only the dead speak the truth.\_

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Over twenty-thousand soldiers stood in the square, surrounding the Pelican, smelling blood. A wild cheer went up as the drop-ship's ramp began to lower. When two huge figures emerged, the crowd went into a frenzy. The Clowns were here. Revenge would be theirs.

Reaching the bottom of the ramp, Lexicus and Chuckles looked into the eyes of the army surrounding them—and they were shocked. The mere sight of the two Spartans had always filled the rebels with fear. They had seen it countless times during the war. But these soldiers were not afraid \_at all\_. To the contrary, their officers could barely restrain them.

Viktor Turpolev raised his hands for silence, and the crowd was quiet. Savoring the moment, he looked upon the Clowns for the first time. They had destroyed his nation and killed his sons—but they had not escaped justice. A hundred of his best troops surrounded him, and two dozen snipers took up position on small buildings just outside the square. At this distance, not one of them would miss. Standing beside him, urging him to begin, was Ivan Krasky, his top advisor.

"Welcome to Erebus," Turpolev said, as a smile of satisfaction spread across his face. "Here," he said, gesturing with his hands and looking around, "you will die for a long time. You will pay for your atrocities, and for the blood of my sons. You will look into my eyes as you die! I will . . ."

Lexicus felt a glimmer of hope: Turpolev was taking time to gloat. Speaking over a private com he said, "Mike, let me know the instant you restore manual control."

"Roger that."

"Chuck, keep him monologuing."

With pleasure. "Yeah, too bad about your sons," the Spartan spoke mockingly, cutting Turpolev off in the middle of his rant. "But I've got to know, what do you do for family reunions these days? Solitaire? I mean, that must really suck. Only family you had, right? Your only sons," Chuckles said, shaking his head in false sympathy, "butchered like animals."

Turpolev's face burned red with anger.

"I don't have sons myself, of course, so I can't imagine. Still, at least they died like men." The Clown's voice dripped with disgust. "At least you're still alive, eh? Me, I would've fought to the death. Just a dumb Spartan who doesn't know any better. Not you, no, you knew when to quit. Yeah, your sons, they were expendable, but you saved yourself. Smart move."

"My sons died for what they believed!"

"No, your sons died because you didn't have the spine to face us yourself. My God, why do these men follow you?" Laughing, Chuckles dealt the knockout punch. "Your sons knew better at the end. As they slowly died, amidst their cries of agony they cursed you. They called you a pathetic coward. They called you a lot of other things tooâ€"want to hear?"

"No, liar, I do not," Turpolev answered, barely controlling his rage. "Before the end, you will beg for death!" Turning to the elite soldiers around him he finally gave the order. "Take them both, but don't kill them!"

Twenty-four snipers sighted in, as the elite soldiers moved forward carrying rocket-launchers and shotguns. Chuckles palmed his huge combat knife, and smiled.

Mike's voice crackled inside Lex's helmet. "Ready to go!"

"Back her up, NOW!" Lexicus yelled.

"Roger that!" Coming to life, the ship went flying to the rear, only inches off the ground. Lexicus jumped in, trying to grab Turpolev as they flew backwardsâ€"but he had disappeared, knocked aside by one of his bodyguards. Staying low, the Pelican plowed through the enraged soldiers, sending bodies flying into the air. Thousands of men stood in the square, every one of them armed to the teeth.

But nobody fired.

Taken by surprise, and ordered not to kill the Clowns, even the elite troops froze and watched helplessly as the Pelican left the square, gained altitude and disappeared.

Turpolev was furious. "Krasky! Call the \_Cerberus\_! They haveâ€" he suddenly stopped. His advisor was no longer next to him.

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The Pelican hugged the ground, barely clearing the trees as Mike put distance between them and the soldiers. None of them had expected it go so good, and they knew it wouldn't be that easy again. Walking to the front of the ship, Lexicus opened up a channel to the \_Cerberus.\_

"I want to speak to Captain Addy!" It didn't take long.

"This is Captain Addy. Lexicus?"

\_"Surprise."\_

"Uh, right. I'm truly sorry that we were put in such a position, but there was no other way."

"If that's true, I guess all is lost." Lexicus answered in a frigid voice.

"No, " the captain said, choosing his words carefully, "now we need to support \_your\_ team. Retrieve Sagus and his cargo, and we'll all go home together. So tell me, what do I need to do?"

"Pray that Turpolev kills every last one of us." Lexicus replied, his voice pure poison. "Because if we get back to that ship \_I am going to kill you.\_ "

Silence.

"See you soon, Captain."

Sitting terrified in the back of the Pelican, Ivan Krasky prepared for the worst. As the ship plowed backwards in the square, Chuckles had grabbed him by the leg and dragged him aboard like a rag doll. Now the large Spartan stood over him like a Greek god.

"You were standing right next to the Big Guy, huh?" Chuckles asked playfully. "Told him when to speak, when to be quiet? I bet that means that you know a lot." Unfastening his large helmet, he pulled it off slowly, and leveled a lethal gaze at his captive.

Krasky shrank back in horror.

Chuckles' skin was horribly scarred, and pale as a corpse. His large mouth was a crowded mess of jagged yellow teeth that seemed on loan from a wildlife exhibit. His lips and nose were the color of fresh blood, and orange hair rose from his head like a fire gorging itself on pure oxygen. Set in the center like hideous black jewels were two cold, lifeless eyes. Taken together, the face was maddening; like a

nightmare that lingers for hours after you wake.

Yes, Krasky would talk. He would tell Chuckles all that he knew, and then curse himself for not knowing more.

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Steven Thanatos walked into the cell flanked by two handpicked soldiers—handpicked for their total lack of conscience. The twelve by twelve concrete room had one table, two chairs and the stench of human waste. An emaciated, hooded prisoner hung by his wrists on the opposite wall, his feet dangling inches from the floor. Such had been his sorry condition since his arrival—but the time for such comforts was over. With a nod from Thanatos, the henchman took the wretch from the wall, chained him into one of the chairs and removed his hood and earplugs.

For the first time in forty days, David Sagus could breathe easily. As his eyes adjusted to the low light, he saw a man sitting across the table, smiling.

"Hello David. Let me apologize for taking so long to come and greet you."

Sagus looked up with hatred, and said in a thin, raspy voice, "Stephen Thanatos."

"Ah, so you do remember me David." Pushing a glass of water across the table, Thanatos said, "Go ahead, drink. You'll need your voice." Flashing a smile that chilled David's blood, he continued. "How are things at ONI? Do they miss me?"

The prisoner merely stared with exhaustion and hate.

"Fine, we can get right to it then." Leaning across the table, he looked directly into David's eyes, and spoke softly. "Why did ONI send you to that boiling rock fifty-eight light years from Earth? You know, I could just open the container and find out."

"Go ahead." David's eyes sparkled. "Lost any men yet, Stephen?"

Thanatos just stared.

"Thought so," Sagus laughed. "You've stolen yourself a \_real\_ prize."

"What is in the container, David?"

"Of all people, I'd thought you would've figured that out by now."

Thanatos was losing patience. "The container, David. Why does ONI want it?"

Straightening up, David leaned forward and spit in his captor's face. "Go to—oh wait, you're already here."



"No," Thanatos said as he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his face, "you have much more to learn about Hell. Allow me to teach you." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out an adjustable leather strap with two steel balls attached to it about eight inches apart. A twelve-inch wooden rod went through an opening at each end of the band.

"I'm seventy-six years old, David, but compared to this device here, I'm just a youngster. They were using this little beauty on criminals and heretics a thousand years before I was born." Fitting the band around David's head, he adjusted it so that the two-inch steel balls were on the temples, beside each of his eyes. It fit loosely, with the wooden rod holding the band together directly behind his head.

"It's really very simple. All I do is twist this rod," David heard the leather stretch against the wood, as the rod was turned, tightening the band. "And with each twist, the strap tightens, increasing the pressure on those the steel balls." He twisted it again, and the balls pressed painfully into his head. "Eventually, the pressure will be so great that the balls will sink into your temples, and force your eyes right out of their sockets."

\_Oh crap.\_

"David, it is a horrible way to go. Don't do it to yourself. Not to protect one lousy secret, and certainly not because of loyalty to ONI. Think about itâ€"you will talk eventually. Everyone does." In this Thanatos spoke the truth, and Sagus knew it. Everyone broke; everybody talked. But David wasn't about to make it easyâ€"on him, or on them.

"What is in the container, David?"

Silence.

Thanatos nodded, and the soldier behind Sagus twisted the rod once, tightening the strap and sending waves of pain through David's head. He winced, but didn't utter a sound.

"What does ONI want with the container, David?"

Again there was no reply, and again the rod was twisted. Steel pressed hard into David's temples, crushing soft tissue. Waves of nausea began to churn his stomach.

"David, what is in the container? Don't do this to yourself. ONI is a corrupt, bloated collection of liars, and you know it! I plead with you, don't make me do this."

Sagus convulsed, and then vomited. Then, looking up at his torturer, his eyes burning with pain and defiance, he smiled. Thanatos smiled back, and then nodded to his henchman.

The rod twisted again. David heard the sickening sound of his temples being crushed an instant before the maddening pain caused him to black out. Immediately, a soldier injected something into his arm, and the prisoner became conscious again, waking to indescribable agony. He could feel the balls pressing behind his eyes, and the first bits of sanity began to slip away.

Thanatos placed a mirror in front of his face, and Sagus' mind began to teeter even more. To his horror, his eyes were protruding from his head like some crazy cartoon character.

In a tone of pure sympathy, Thanatos said, "Enough, David? Have you satisfied honor?" He waited a few moments, and then signaled another twist.

"No! no, no, please, please," David pleaded, sobbing. "I'll talk, I'll talk." He was broken.

"Good. What is in the container, David?"

David answered. Thanatos was first surprised, and then livid.

"You take me for a fool!? Do you think I am a child, an idiot?!  
Thanatos ordered another twist.

"No! No, it's the truth! Please! PLEASE! NOOOOOOOOOO!" The rod twisted, and David was out of his mind with pain, thrashing, and screaming. Both of his eyes strained against their sockets, bulging out grotesquely. He barely looked human.

Another twist and it would be over.

"This is the last time I ask, David. What is in the container?"

"I told you!," Sagus screamed between sobs, "I told you!"

"How could this be? I want to believe you, but . . . how?"

Sagus answered, screaming from the edge of sanity. "I don't know! But, but you've lost men already, right?!"

Thanatos nodded.

"Please, please, then you've got to believe me!" David yelled, now completely panicked. "Please, please . . . I'm not lying . . . please believe me . . . do you believe me? Do you?!\_"

"Yes David, I believe you." With that, Stephen scribbled something on his data-pad, looked up and then nodded to the soldier "ordering a final twist of the rod.

C.T. Clown

## 5. Drawing with Broken Fingers

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><strong>

\*\*Ghosts of Erebus (part five): Drawing with Broken Fingers\*\*

\* \* \*

>A large soldier entered the cell, dragging what was left of the Operations Officer by a bloody handful of hair. As the mutilated corpse of Shane Gentry was dropped next to him, Captain Addy searched for the appropriate responseâ€”shock, sympathy, grief, revulsionâ€”but found only a dreamlike numbness. Three weeks of waking nightmares had shot his emotions to doll-rags, replacing them with cold logic. A few minutes earlier the tortured screams and pitiful begging had stopped, so this was expected.<p><p>

"Whooooeee!" the soldier looked down at Addy with a toothy grin. "Strong one. He was, uh . . . your good friend, eh?"

Addy nodded slowly.

"Yeah, he said that you two had been together for," he flipped through some notes, "twenty years? Wow. He also told us that you know all about the Clowns." Addy knew this was a lie. "Could've saved himself some incredible pain and told us earlier. Oh well, what's one more death?"

The Captain almost nodded in agreement. \_What's one more death?\_ This is Erebus, where life is tread down like a winepress, and the soured ground drinks the blood.

A loud knock on his cabin door woke the Captain from his memories. \_And they wonder why I don't sleep.\_

"Come in."

His muscles tensed as Lieutenant Scott Carion entered the room. Something about the young officer seemed off, but he could hardly trust his feelings in this matter: as Admiral Kraft's personal lapdog, Carion was on the ship to make sure that Addy did \_exactly\_ what the Admiral ordered.

"Captain, we need to talk."

Making no attempt to hide his disdain, Addy replied, "And what do \_we\_ need to talk about Lieutenant? You are here to observeâ€”period. You are not a member of my command crew, and I am not interested in your views or opinions."

"Sir, " Carion replied with more confidence than he actually felt, "I am here to represent Admiral Kraft, and you know it. We need to talk about the situation. It was . . . unexpected."

\_Why, you sniveling infant!\_ "Unexpected?! These are the Clowns, you imbecile. Plus four additional Spartans who are only here because of \_your\_ screw-up. Now \_you\_ are going to try and tell \_me\_ how to respond?"

Deflated, the small man answered in a thin voice. "No sir, I am here to tell you how the Admiral wants you to respond." After a moment of silence, Carion continued. "I assume that your offer to help the Clowns was merely a ruse?"

"And if it wasn't?"

"Our orders are clear, Sir. We are not, under any circumstances to help them. You \_do\_ remember our meeting with the Admiral, don't you

sir?"

Addy was silent. He remembered, but he had never understood the order. Why wouldn't they support their own forces, especially when it was in their interest? When he questioned the Admiral he was told that the reasons "didn't concern him".

"Sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant, I remember." Carion smirked.

That's it! Standing quickly, Addy got right into Carion's face. At six foot two, he towered over the young officer. "But you need to remember something, son: your sugar daddy is almost forty light-years away, while I," he poked the Lieutenant's chest with each syllable, "am right here with you. Space is a dangerous, volatile place and we lose men on every mission. Understand?" Carion shook his head. "Dismissed."

The Lieutenant left, mopping his forehead with a handkerchief. A few minutes later in his cabin, he placed a communication device into his ear. A voice crackled on the other end.

"Yes?"

"I think we've hit a snag. I need to speak with Turpolev, immediately"

\* \* \*

>It was almost sunset when Chuckles finished with Krasky. The interrogation, which lasted several hours, had started in the Pelican just outside the city, and ended in heavily wooded hills over one hundred miles further west. Turpolev's doomed advisor sat on a box at the edge of a small clearing.<p><p>

"Quite a story," the Spartan said, pulling out his knife, and studying the blade. "Did you know that when they first settled Reach it was covered with dogs?" Krasky shook his head, confused. "At least, they looked like dogsâ€"nothing like we have on Earth. They were about the size of a pony, huge teeth and very powerful. I bet that they could've held their own against the big cats in Africa. Strange, fascinating animals. They had never seen men, so they weren't afraid of us, but they didn't consider us as prey either."

"But let me tell you," Chuckles stood. "We must've tasted like prime rib to those dogs, because onceâ€"for whatever reasonâ€"they got a bite of us and realized what they were missing," he began to circle Krasky, "they couldn't get enough. By the time I was growing up on Reach, most of them had been killed. But one day out in the woods on a training mission I actually saw one. That particular dog must've tasted human flesh before, because it took off after me like the dinner bell had rang. I never was one to run from a fight, so I stood my ground," Stopping in front of Krasky, he waived the massive blade in his face. "And killed him with this."

A coward, Krasky's eyes went wide as he stared at the weapon.

"You're a lot like him. Once you tasted blood, you were hooked. I had to kill the dog, and now I have to kill you. No different really, exceptâ€" with lightning speed, Chuckles slashed the rebel's throat, "â€"I felt bad for the dog."

Lexicus was standing near the Pelican when Chuckles found him. "That," the Clown said, pointing at the system's star sitting low on the horizon, "is Zeta2 Reticuli."

Shocked, Lexicus looked around and said, "This is \_Orpheus?\_"

"Yeah, doesn't look glassed, does it?" Then, looking down, shaking his head in disgust, Chuckles said, "Wait until you hear the rest

\* \* \*

>Stopping several feet away, Tyler "Weed" DeWeerd stared at the thick, steel door as if it were a firing squad. He had heard the stories. After all, the more terrifying something is, the more likely a man is to repeat it.<p><p>

\_Everybody\_ was repeating this.

How seven young men had died of apparent heart attacks; how the dead men's expressions had been so hideous that the doctors had covered the faces during the autopsies; how one soldier had gripped his weapon so tight that they found him with several broken fingers. He had even heard rumors that the box contained . . . something truly evil. Still, Weed was not a coward, and had no wish arouse the wrath of Stephen Thanatos, lest he end up like most of the other soldiersâ€"a mindless animal. He had been ordered to guard the container, and orders were orders.

Summoning all of his courage he finally walked the final steps and slowly opened the door. It was small, and like nearly every room in the military complex, had white walls and a shiny, black floor. A chair to his left represented the only furnishings, and sitting on the ground, nearly fifteen feet away was a white container, about the size of a large, rectangular suitcase. Weed laughed at his silly fear: it looked utterly harmless. After shutting and locking the door, he sat down in the chair.

\_More likely this stupid chair killed them than that thing\_ he thought, trying to get comfortable. \_Idiots! Just trying to spook me with lies. Guard duty where you get to sit down? Nothing spooky about that.\_ Stretching his arms and letting out a long, heartfelt yawn, he had an idea. Before anyone, even an officer could enter the room, Weed would have to unlock the door. He could actually get some sleep \_while\_ on guard duty! Smiling, he reached over and turned off the light.

A soldier walking past the door was the first to hear the screams, accompanied by dull thumps. Twenty minutes later, when rescuers were finally able to force their way in, the floor was slick with blood, and Weed had collapsed from shock. Nearly every bone in his mangled hands had been shattered, pounded into bloody pulp on the thick steel doorâ€"with the key hanging around his neck.

"Look at this," a soldier motioned to the floor moments after Weed was lifted onto a stretcher and wheeled away. "Seems like he was

drawing something with his blood. It looks like . . . " Their mouths dropped open.

Nobody said a word. They \_all\_ knew what it looked like.

\* \* \*

>Captain Addy had come to a difficult decision. Ever wary of recklessly risking the lives of his menâ€"he'd seen enough of them die in the pastâ€"he felt far worse about sending any of them to Erebus. But he had a mission to accomplishâ€"whether he understood it or notâ€"and that left him little choice. He tapped his com.<p><p>

On the other side of the ship a legendary ODST Captain heard his com beep. None of his men knew his real name, and none dared ask. "Sir" to those he ranked, and "Helljumper" to his superiors, his presence on the \_Cerberus\_ was no accident. Few soldiers dared to face Spartans, even in training situations, and even fewer had a chance of success. But Helljumper had no fear of Spartans, or of anything else for that matter. To him they were merely a potential challenge: a challenge that he had been hoping to face. Each time Spartans had trained against ODST's, Helljumper had volunteered. And each time he had been turned down because "he was too valuable to risk." That, he knew, was a load of crap. As the only ODST to \_ever\_ defeat a Spartan in the Navy's \_Combat Simulator\_, they saw him as a threatâ€"and he loved it.

He keyed the Com. "Captain?"

"Helljumper, I'm going to need you on Erebus." A smile spread across the ODST's face.

"Thank you, Captain. How many men?"

"You'll go over that with Lieutenant Timmer," he said, referring to his Combat Officer. "There are things that you do not know about this planet, Captain. Things that I believe you and your men are going to see when you get there. If ever there was one, this planet is a living hell."

Helljumper laughed. "Hell, Captain? I think me and my men will feel right at home then. Sir, you point, we'll go."

"Very well, Lieutenant Timmer will meet you in the wardroom in five minutes."

"Can you tell me one thing Captain? Are we going there to help the Spartans or hunt them?" To Helljumper, it seemed that the answer took forever.

Addy shut his eyes, and rubbed his temples. Sometimes he hated this job. "You are going to hunt them. God be with you."

\* \* \*

>Of all things, they could have at least killed him. But they didn't, and once again he was hanging by his wrists. Only now, he could breathe easier: they no longer had a reason to pull a hood over his head. To his shame, David remembered that he had answered the

traitor's questions. But Thanatos had been too eager, and asked too few. Now, the fool was ignorant of something, something that sent a chill down David's spine.<p><p>

Time was running out.

How much was left? Days? Hours? Minutes? Had the time already passed? As they undoubtedly knew, the container was a powerful freezer. What they probably \_did not\_ know was that it was only good for two monthsâ€"two months that were all but over. Once that container began to warm . . . \_Why didn't they kill me?!\_

Across the complex, locked in a room and guarded inside by only a camera, the container stirred. Sagus was wrong: time was not shortâ€"time had run out.

C.T. Clown

## 6. A Serious Lack of Vultures

**\*\*Ghosts of Erebus (part six): A Serious Lack of Vultures\*\***

\* \* \*

>David Sagus could feel it, since he had felt it before, but they paid him no notice and his screams of terror echoed and died on the harsh stone walls of his cell. Animals could feel it, but as dogs tore at their cages and birds fled the city, nobody took note. But they would feel it soonâ€"very soon. Deep inside the military complex in a small room, the air temperature began to rise and the container started to glow brighter and brighter until it looked like super-heated steel at a foundry.<p><p>

Time had run out: the container exploded into hundreds of pieces.

Across the hall, Kirkland Park was startled awake by the noise and glanced up to find the video screen blank. He had fallen asleepâ€"again. \_What do they expect, watching a box for hours?\_ Gulping cold, black coffee from a steel mug, he checked the monitor and winced when he found that it was on and working properly. Finishing off the bitter liquid and picking up his gun he reluctantly walked out the door and across the hall. But when he grabbed the doorknob, the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

It was hot.

Backing up a couple of steps, he spoke into his com.

"Sergeant Sing? Hello? Sergeant Sing? Are you there?" \_Where is he?\_ "This is Park, Hello? We have a situation with the container, repeat, a situation with the container . . . anybody there?"

Silence.

\_Crap.\_ Taking hold of the warm doorknob, he twisted it and, careful to stay in the hall, he pushed the door open and looked in. Red-hot pieces of the container were scattered everywhere. Since the light

had been knocked out in the explosion the super-heated debris filled the room with an eerie, hellish glow. Park palmed his flashlight, and swept it around the room, relieved to find nothing. Slowly, he crossed the room to check the area where the container had sat. Nothing.

Towering behind him, a terrifying black shape drew nearer, growing more visible as the debris cooled and the room darkened. It was within the darkness, yet deeper, blacker, darker. Feeling the presence, Park whipped the flashlight around—but saw only more debris. \_Must be the danged coffee.\_ Turning his back, he searched the other side of the room, but as the light moved it was visible again, a sinister pitch-black hole in the darkness. Slowly, it began to move toward the soldier.

"Park? You there? This is Sing. Hello?"

\_Finally!\_ "Yes, sir, something happened to the container. I think you should—" The flashlight blinked off, and Park felt that his heart had nearly stopped. "Hang on, sir," he turned to leave.

Halfway across the complex, Sergeant Sing yanked the com out before his ear-drum burst—but he could still hear the horrible screaming. "Park! Park!" Rushing across the huge building to the hallway, he found a dozen soldiers already on the scene—most of them vomiting.

Sing went to the door, shined his flashlight, and violently spit up his supper. At least things were starting to make sense, he thought, even if "sense" was truly terrifying. Why would young men have heart failure? Why would a man with mangled, broken fingers draw a crucifix with his own blood? Why?

What would you do if you saw the Devil?

\* \* \*

>With blurring quickness the Spartan dove over the rocks, rolled to his feet and leveled his pistol . . . at empty space—space that *should* have been filled by the head of his adversary. It was hardly a surprise anymore: nothing about this fight had made any sense.

He, like all Spartans, had been trained to respond appropriately in every conceivable combat situation. If the enemy did this, he did that, and did it with inhuman quickness. By the time a Spartan completed training, moves and countermoves performed in the heat of battle were reflexive almost to the point of being involuntary. Although he had been thus far ineffective, the Spartan knew that his responses had been doctrinally flawless.

But he had never faced an opponent like this.

Crouching behind a bush fifty-feet behind the bewildered Spartan, Helljumper smiled as he aimed his pistol. He wouldn't miss. At this distance the legendary ODSI could shoot the ring off a man's finger without drawing blood.

BANG! BANG! BANG!



Three shots, three hits, one hole.

Dr. Catherine Halsey was not easy to shock, but as she watched video display on the Navy's \_Combat Simulator,\_ her mouth dropped open. Quickly regaining composure she stood, causing the VIP's around her to follow suit. Turning, to her left she looked straight into Admiral Denning's eyes "That man," she said pointing emphatically at the screen, "is \_not\_ fighting the Master Chief."

Helljumper would never forget the look on Halsey's face as she left the base. He had seen it in the face of many opponents, but it had never felt quite this sweet. It was a look of fear. Another soldier, a lesser soldier, would be picked to test the Spartan leader, and the thought made the veteran ODS smile. They were scared of him, and that was victory enough.

With an IQ well over two hundred, Helljumper was as formidable with his mind as he was with weapons. Early in his military career he had applied his stunning intellect to revamping the Navy's outdated combat training. His recommendations were flatly rejected. Although obviously brilliant, the brass judged them too sweeping and too radical—and thus decided to do nothing.

The kernel of his doctrine was as old as warfare itself: \_know your enemy.\_ But he took it a step further. Spending untold hours watching video, reading manuals, and reviewing war journals, Helljumper catalogued and memorized the operational tactics of \_every\_ organized military known to man. With this knowledge he developed responses that used the enemy's own tactical discipline to control them. Tirelessly conditioning himself in effective, yet unorthodox tactics, he rendered his own moves invisible to his enemy, all the while using his opponent's ingrained, predictable responses to lead them exactly where he wanted. It worked flawlessly on his fellow soldiers, and now he had proved that it worked on Spartans as well.

Shaking violently as the Pelican punched through the upper atmosphere, Helljumper's thoughts were jarred back into the present. Looking at the nine ODS's accompanying him on the drop ship, he swelled with pride and admiration. These were the best-trained soldiers he had ever led into battle; the select few who were bright enough to adopt his combat doctrine and tough enough to carry it out.

A voice crackled in his headset, "Five minutes 'til we hit dirt, sir!"

"Five minutes, men! They say this place is Hell, so don't be surprised if you see some old friends! Lock and load!"

\* \* \*

>It was several hours after sunset before Lexicus was able to gather his thoughts. Their perimeter was set and their next move, which was only a few hours away, had been planned. They had even taken the time to bury Krasky since, as Chuckles pointed out with a measure of regret, the planet had, "a serious lack of vultures." <p>Upon hearing that the planet was named Erebus, another word for Hell in Greek mythology, both he and Chuckles had laughed. For reasons that were lost on the Spartan leaders, clandestine agencies like ONI enjoyed

giving ridiculous and extravagant code names to their many secrets. Sitting alone in the haunting, reddish light of Eurydice, the planet's small moon, Lexicus was far from laughter. This once beautiful place had been changed forever, blackened by man's atrocities. Countless bloody corpses had been sown like hellish seeds into the insatiable ground, and their damning silence cried from beneath the blackened reek, demanding revenge.<p>

But that wasn't why the Spartans were here.

"Lex?" Xraf's voice crackled in his helmet. "A Pelican just landed three or four clicks west of camp. My guess is it's from the \_Cerberus\_. Orders?"

Twisting his mouth into a sneer beneath his helmet, Lexicus said, "I don't think they came here for campfire storiesâ€"take them out." It made no difference to Lex whether they were here to help or hurt. They had come; they would die.

\* \* \*

>Swiveling around in her chair, Lieutenant Sandie Gordon looked pale. "Captain, we have communication from Erebus." Pausing and taking a deep breath, she said, "Turpolev wants to speak with you." <p>Anger flashed momentarily on Addy's face, quickly replaced by military stoicism. Placing a communications device in his ear, he said, "Very well, put him through."<p>

Speaking softly, the voice had a slight Russian accent. "Robert, is that you?"

"Yes, this is Captain Addy."

"Ah, very well. It is good to speak with you under better circumstances."

\_You mean without my command crew dead, and a knife to my throat you filthyâ€"\_ "I'm very busy, so if you would please get to your point."

"You have landed men on my planet without my permission, or consent. If they are not withdrawn immediatelyâ€"

"Those men are there," Addy could barely speak the next words, "to make good on our word to you. They are hunting the Clowns."

"No!" Turpolev yelled in sudden anger, "The Clowns are \_mine!\_ I will catch them. Recall your men immediately, or they will be killed."

"And the container?"

"When we have the Clowns, you will have your container."

"Close the channel, Lieutenant."

Pulling the com from his ear, and balling his hand into a fist, the Captain turned around slowly and leveled a chilling gaze at Lieutenant Scott Carion. "\_Lieutenant,\_ how did Turpolev know we landed men?"

Carion's face flushed bright red, but he said nothing.

"ANSWER ME, LIEUTENANT!" The bridge crew froze. Captain Addy rarely displayed anger, but now he looked as if he could kill. This time Carion's lips moved, but as the young officer withered under the Captain's wrath, he found it impossible to form words.

Suddenly rushing forward, Addy grabbed the Lieutenant's neck in his ham-sized fist, pulled out his pistol and pressed in painfully into his right temple.

Speaking in a cold voice Addy said, "You have until the count of three, soldier! ONE!"

"I d-d-donâ€" "

"TWO!"

"I-I was t-told to . . ."

"Told to \_WHAT?!\_"

Whimpering like a child, Carion said, "I was t-told to make sure Turpolev knew . . . understood our intentions."

"You told \_Turpolev\_ where and when we were landing men," then pulling Carion's face within inches of his own he yelled, "\_MY\_ MEN?!" Without warning, Addy swung the pistol forward, smashing it viciously into Carion's open mouth and shattering his jaw. "Lock him in the brig."

As two soldiers carried the moaning traitor away, the Combat Officer, Lieutenant Justin Timmer, breathed a sigh of reliefâ€"his first breath of any kind in over a minute. The broken jaw would buy him a little time, but eventually Carion would tell the Captain everything. Timmer knew he couldn't let that happenâ€"he knew what had to be done.

"Lieutenant Timmer, contact Helljumper and tell him to abort immediately."

"Yes sir." Keying his com, Timmer tried to hail them, but got only static. Again, he tried, and again, nothing.

"Lieutenant, if we don't contact those men immediately, they will die! What is the problem?"

"Sir," Timmer said, furiously punching buttons, looking concerned and overall, delivering a fine acting performance. "It just isn't working, I don't know."

As the Captain slammed his fist down on his chair in frustration, Timmer smiled inside, happy with his himself. \_I should have been in movies.\_

\* \* \*

>As he has expected, the Spartan began to close in on the Pelican. But, Helljumper noticed, he was very careful. He had seen only one of

them, but knew that more could come along at any time. Slowly, cautiously, expertly, he fell in behind him. Creeping closer, he was almost ready.<hr>Xraf had been aware that he was being followed for the last several minutes as he moved through the thick woods towards the suspected LZ. Suddenly turning with blurring speed, Xraf looked into the woods and saw something very strangeâ€”a single soldier. Nobody came after Spartans alone. Yet, a hundred yards behind him he saw a large ODST in the woods.

Making the first move, Xraf tore through the trees. Although armed with only a combat knife, he knew the ODST's tactics better than most of them did, and was confident of victory. Coming to a stop, he surveyed the areaâ€”but the man was gone.

"Take off your helmet, soldier, now!" Surprised by the voice behind him, Xraf spun around to see an ODST aiming a pistol at his head.

"NOW!" Reluctantly, Xraf complied. "Are you unarmed?" Silence. "I asked a question, soldier! Answer or I do brain surgery!"

"Only with a knife."

Helljumper was disappointed. No wonder it was so easy. "Okay, I have some questions to ask. If I see you twitch a muscle, I'll put a bullet through an eye, got it?"

Xraf nodded.

"Where are theâ€”"

Suddenly they both heard a low rumbling, like distant thunder that seemed to be getting closer and closer. Beneath their feet, the ground began to tremble like a small quake and crazy, maniacal screams began to echo through the forest like some sort of nightmare. Xraf saw the ODST flinch as horrible cries cut through the air from the direction of the LZ.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Xraf leapt through air, tackling Helljumper, grabbing his pistol and pinning him down. Suddenly, the screams were upon them, and they both looked up to see a massive wave of humanity cutting through the forest in their direction. Wildly screaming, the soldiers in front were covered in blood, and one of them was carrying an ODST helmetâ€”with the head still in it.

Without a word, Xraf grabbed Helljumper's battle rifle, returned the ODST's pistol and stood him to his feet.

"Captain, you have clips for this thing?"

Looking at the approaching hoard utterly without fear, Helljumper almost smiled as he tossed Xraf the BR ammo. "Make 'em count, Spartan!"

And so they stood, side by side, heads up and weapons belching flame as the mass of wild men flowed down upon them like an unstoppable tidal wave.

C.T. Clown

## 7. Voices of the Dead

**\*\*Voices of the Dead: A Poem of Erebus\*\***

Beauty hides this death

> Stunning corpse that has no breath<br> Decay and rot dwell inside

> Creations of a broken mind<br> Spewing from a broken mind

Many, many have come here

> Many screams and many tears<br> Blessed few have ever left

> In Hell they call it Erebus<br> In screams they call it

Erebus

Living men speak only lies

> Madness burning in their eyes<br> It's true only the wasting dead

> Speak the truth on Erebus<br> Ghosts speak truth on Erebus

Bloody, broken masses found

> Buried in the soured ground<br> Swallowed whole within the mud

> Drunken soil drinks the blood<br> Drunk with guilt it drinks the blood

Have you seen the graves they dig

> Massive holes where most here live<br> Screams immortal, mournful sad

> Drowned by whispers of the mad<br> The wicked whispers of the mad

C.T. Clown

## 8. Fairytales and Nightmares

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><strong>Ghosts of Erebus (part seven): Fairytales and Nightmares<hr>\*\*

> <em>What is a joyful sound to a devil, or a pleasing fragrance to an evil spirit? Will a demon dance merrily to a dirge, or smile widely at a funeral? Quiet your thoughts and mind the silence; hear the dirge and see the demons danceâ€"for this is no fairytale, but a nightmare.<em>

More than anything, he wanted to scream, but forty minutes of panicked cries had reduced his voice to a whisper. Less than twelve hours before he had been blinded, his eyes forced from his head during hellish torture. Yet, as invisible death walked the hallway leaving behind a trail of fear as a snail leaves slime, David Sagus was the only person who could see it. Blacker than pitch and stooped menacingly beneath the ten-foot ceiling, it moved slowly towards his cell. Physical eyes could have shut out the terror, but blindness forced David to stare unblinking at deathâ€"and stare he did, mouth wide, screaming silence.

Suddenly, the black nightmare paused and a chilling cry erupted as the door guard was horribly slaughtered. It was silent for a moment, and then David heard the sickening sound of a body being dropped to the floor. Sagus lifted his head, but he didn't have to look up to see it. Behind the thick steel door, it, the black monster, the terror that had haunted his dreams for over a month, stood motionlessâ€”and his heart trembled.

\_It\_ was staring at him.

\* \* \*

>An instant after the ground began to shake, Rhinox hailed Lexicus on his com. <p>"We have thousands of soldiers approaching on foot from the east!"<p>

"Roger that, whatâ€”"

"No time Lex! Get everyone in the Pelican \_now!\_"

In less than a minute they were lifting off the ground. Climbing high above the trees they looked to the east, and their blood ran cold. More than one hundred \_thousand\_ soldiers blanketed the countryside like angry ants.

"Mike, sweep the area two klicks east for Xraf and Rhinox."

"There!" Mike said, pointing down at flashes of gunfire, "That's them! My God . . ." Within a few short seconds they would be overrun, and they were too far from a clearing for him to land.

\_Screw it!\_"

Without warning, Mike threw the Pelican into a nosedive, straight into the forest. It didn't take long for Lexicus to read his mind.

"Mike, are you \_crazy?!\_"

He didn't reply, but as they neared the trees he yelled, "HOLD ON!"

They were making kills, but it was like fighting a tidal wave with a spongeâ€”they weren't slowing them down one bit. Within seconds the wall of wild, screaming soldiers would crash into them, and that would be the end. Looking over at Helljumper, he couldn't help but be impressed. Having just run out of ammunition, the ODSr calmly holstered his pistol, and palmed his combat knife. \_The man has grit.\_

Suddenly hearing a loud snapping and crashing sound behind him, Xraf turnedâ€”and couldn't believe his eyes.

\_No way!\_"

A Pelican was violently plowing its way through the tops of trees, straight towards them. Approaching now with the finality of death, the hoard was only a few meters away. Grabbing the ODSr like a child, he ran backwards. Xraf saw the ramp lower moments before the drop ship passed overhead. Leaping two meters straight up, and grabbing

the ramp, he slung Helljumper into the ship. Turpertrator grabbed Xraf's hand.

"I got you!" As he pulled him in, a tree suddenly snagged Xraf's foot, pulling Turper down and slamming his chest into the deck. Dazed for a moment, he lookedâ€"his hand was empty and Xraf was gone.

Finally, the Pelican cleared the trees. Walking to the rear of the ship as the ramp closed, Lexicus felt sick. Xraf was lost, and Rhinox would not respond on his com. \_All THAT to save one lousy ODS?!!\_ Taking off his helmet, he grabbed Helljumper by the neck, pinning him against the wall.

"What are you doing here?" His voice was not friendly.

Helljumper didn't even flinch. "I'm here to hunt \_you.\_" Then looking a little awkward he asked, "Who was that Spartan with me?"

Slightly loosening his grip, and speaking in a pained voice Lex said, "Xraf. He was a good soldier and a friend. Rhinox, his brother, was lost too."

Helljumper nodded his head slowly. "He was an excellent soldier. I arrived with nine \_excellent\_ soldiers, men that I've spent the last seven years of my life training." He paused, and then his face a mix of anger and pain he said, "They were like sons to me. Were you close to the men you lost?"

"Yes."

"If you don't get your hand off my neck \_now,\_" Helljumper said in a voice that made soldiers drop their weapons, "you're gonna get a lot closer!"

Glancing down, Lexicus saw a combat knife poised mere inches from the bare skin of his neck. Slowly, he released his grip and pulled his arm back.

Helljumper replaced his weapon. "Enough of this! We've both lost men and I've a feeling that we've both been betrayed. I think it's about time we showed them who they're dealing with. You with me?"

Lexicus could not help it, this ODS had earned his respect. Walking forward and clasping his hand he said, "Feet first, Captain?" Then with a hint of a smile, "You've come to the right place."

\* \* \*

>Walking down the long, white hallways of the base, Stephen Thanatos could see it in the stooped postures, frightened eyes and worried facesâ€"a crushing invisible weight, a presence so thick that you could almost taste it in the air. <em>Fear.</em> He, perhaps more than any other man, had been witness to it. Staring into countless faces as they diedâ€"or worseâ€"he had become acquainted and completely obsessed with fear, as well as its many causes. Most men found it bitter and disturbing, but Thanatos savored it like a child would a piece of chocolate, rolling it around in his mouth, relishing the strong, sweet taste. Walking the halls to David's cell, passing soldier after soldier, the fear was almost intoxicating.

When he had asked David Sagus about the contents of the container the night before, his captive had replied cryptically, "Of all people, I'd thought you would've figured that out by now."

\_So that's what he meant.\_ Stephen envied this . . . thing.

Stopping outside the door, Thanatos looked around carefully. Only a few splatters of blood on the ceiling remained of the brutal killing half an hour earlier. Entering the cell, Stephen flicked on the light. Hanging on the wall by his wrists, Sagus didn't even acknowledge his entrance.

"Morning David. Sleep well?"

Sagus moved his lips, but he had no voice, and only an inaudible whisper escaped.

"Good. I need to know more about the . . . now what did you say it was again? A \_demon\_?" Walking over until he was only a few feet away he said, "Now David, do you \_really\_ believe that? Just nod or shake your head."

Wearily, the eyeless head shook.

"Of course. Such things exist only in fairytales. Did you call it that merely for lack of reference?"

Sagus nodded.

"Very well."

Now Stephen had a problem—he had come alone. Given recent events the only way he could have brought soldiers with him was by force—and for that he would have needed \_other\_ soldiers. Thanatos had run out of yes-or-no questions and he would now need David to write down his answers. That would require unchaining him from the wall, but even in his severely weakened state, Sagus was not to be taken lightly. Moving him to a chair without help was too big a risk.

Coming closer, Thanatos spoke as a mother would to her young child. "David, I have some more questions, and I'm going to need you to whisper the answers as loud as possible, okay?"

Sagus nodded.

"How did you manage to catch and freeze the creature?"

Sagus whispered, but not loud enough. Thanatos moved closer.

"Try again."

Again he whispered, but it was still too soft. Thanatos moved his ear even closer, so close that David could feel the warmth of the madman's skin.

"One more time."

Moving his head forward with surprising quickness, David clamped his



teeth down on his captor's ear, causing him to scream with pain. With cold savagery slowly kindled over weeks of torture, Sagus thrashed his head like a feeding shark, brutally tearing the ear completely off and spitting it on the floor. Thanatos grabbed his bleeding head and ran from the room, as a smile, a \_real\_ smile, spread across David's face for the first time in over a month.

For Thanatos, it was just as well—the answer was much, much worse.

\* \* \*

>By the time Addy deployed a satellite, there was nothing left to see, save an area that looked like it had been stampeded by cattle. The massive wave of soldiers had undoubtedly wiped out his ODS's, and he was fairly certain, the Clowns too. <p>He was through playing ball with this lunatic, and if Admiral Kraft didn't like that, tough. Their goal had always been to retrieve Lieutenant Sagus and his cargo. Why Kraft had been so bent on burning the Clowns was beyond him, and frankly, he no longer cared. Combat options were few, since he wasn't equipped with a large strike-force. Addy had spent the last twenty minutes locked alone in his cabin going over information about Erebus and the firepower that Turpolev had at his disposal. Suddenly he had an idea.<p>

Picking up his com, he called the bridge. His XO, Lieutenant Sandie Gordon, answered.

"Sandie, I need you and Lieutenant Timmer to meet me in the wardroom in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir." Then after a short pause, "Captain? Lieutenant Timmer is not at his post."

"Then find him, Sandie."

"Yes sir."

\* \* \*

>Lieutenant Scott Carion lay in the infirmary of the <em>Cerberus,<em> handcuffed to a bed and cursing the day he had joined the Navy. Not out loud, of course, since his jaw had been shattered, but that fact made him curse all the more.

\_Where are all the doctors?\_ Finally, he heard the welcome sound of footsteps. But all feeling of relief was soon to vanish.

"Hello, Scott."

Carion looked up, closed his eyes, and then his mind let loose a brilliant series of deeply felt expletives. \_That's why there are no doctors!\_

Pulling out a syringe Lieutenant Justin Timmer looked at Scott with dead eyes. "I brought you a little something for the pain."

\_NO!\_

Carion thrashed wildly as Timmer tried to inject the poison. Darting his eyes, the Weapons Officer feared that the commotion had attracted some onlookers, but saw nothing. Balling his hand, he smashed his fist cruelly into Scott's shattered jaw. Carion convulsed, his eyes rolled back and then, mercifully, he passed out.

Furious at the delay, Justin plunged the syringe into the lifeless arm. \_About time, you filthy piece of a\_

"What are you \_doing\_?!"

Turning around in surprise, Timmer found himself staring into the face of his XO, Lieutenant Sandie Gordon.

She was holding a gun.

Keeping the weapon steady, she spoke into the ship's intercom, "All medical personnel report to the infirmary immediately! We have a medical emergency!"

Timmer was confused. "What are you doing, Sandie?! He's already dead!"

Smiling coldly, Gordon aimed the gun at Timmer's head. "Not for him"for \_you\_."

BANG! BANG!

Justin jerked backwards as two slugs ripped into his brain. Falling over, his head hit the concrete-hard floor with a loud \_crack!\_ But he was dead, and he didn't mind. Lifeless eyes stared as medical workers arrived, and Sandie Gordon pointed and looked grieved. But Justin was not able to see, and the eyes only gave the impression of sight. Too bad: somewhat of an actor himself, Timmer would have been impressed.

\* \* \*

>Back on Earth, Colonel Ackerson had become increasingly uneasy. Something about Admiral Kraft made his skin crawl, and if he had learned anything over his years at ONI, it was to trust his instincts. <p>"Loxias?"<p>

A hologram of a man appeared on his desk. The figure was well muscled, wore the robes of ancient Greek culture and held a musical instrument in his hand that looked like a harp. As he spoke, musical notes would flow across his image and, at times, music would play. An hour ago he had asked the advanced AI to check on something. Although he had undoubtedly completed the task in a few seconds, as was his habit, Loxias kept it to himself for some time, contemplating eventualities. Ackerson had run out of patience.

"Yes Colonel?"

"Stop stalling, Loxias, I need that information."

"Of course Colonel. I do fear for what this may lead to. In telling you this information, I see death."

"That remains to be decided, but whatever happens, it will be

deserved."

The hologram grew darker, and the music struck a sad, minor key. "The death I speak of, Colonel, is your own. If I could possibly dissuade youâ€"

"No, Loxias, I still want the information."

"As you wish, sir." For the ten minutes the AI spoke, his sad tone never wavered. At the end, Ackerson, while not surprised, was enraged.

"Loxias, contact Wiley."

"But Colonel, I beg you!"

"You are not my counselor, Loxias! Do as I say!" Silently the AI obeyed, and the com beeped.

"Wiley? This is Ackerson."

The voice was smooth and cold. "I thought you might be calling."

\_Why in the Devil would he be expecting me?\_ "I have a job for you. His name is Admiral Thomas Kraft."

As the Colonel gave details to the high-priced assassin, Loxias shook his head sadly, played a slow, mournful dirge and slowly faded away.

C.T. Clown

## 9. The Hallways of Hell

\* \* \*

><strong>Ghosts of Erebus (part eight): The Hallways of Hell<strong>

\* \* \*

>Without the bulldozers the job would have taken much longer, and even with them it was no small task. But nobody said life was easy, and you do your best with what you are given. For weeks they worked tirelessly, toiling long hours on little or no sleep. Scattered as they were, finding them all was an historic test of leadership and ingenuity; but the biggest challenge lay between the bulldozing and the locating. The <em>real<em> challenge was in the killing.

How \_do\_ you kill over three million people without wasting precious ammunition? It was a problem that Stephen Thanatos had not planned for when he arrived in 2533.

With the Covenant bearing down on the inner colonies, it had not been hard for Thanatos to make his case. He had worked for years as a top scientist in ONI's human augmentation program, all without the benefit of test subjects. But in the desperation that spread in the wake of the Covenant onslaught, ONI had handed Stephen a virtual gold

mineâ€"and its name was Orpheus.

In Early 2533 it was reported that Orpheus, the most populous of the three main prison planets, had been glassed by the Covenant. In reality, ONI had taken possession of the planet, renamed it Erebus and classified its location. A UNSC Admiral had once remarked angrily that you could sum ONI up in two words: fairytale and nightmares. The fairytale was the lie they told: the nightmare was the truth they hid. Orpheus' glassing had been the fairytale.

Erebus became the nightmare.

This time, however, ONI too had been played, for Thanatos had no interest in stronger and better soldiers. No, his passion was death and madnessâ€"and these he brought to Erebus with both hands. Using treatments lovingly developed over his years of study, he began his reign of death with enthusiasm. Soon, the cries of madmen filled the air day and night, and the great prison within the city of Parnassus became a stumbling, drooling, chaotic hell. As the terrified sane were forced to live among the mad, they fell victim to savage murder and rampant cannibalismâ€"all while Thanatos watched with the glee of a child viewing fireworks.

When the Bishkek rebellion was finally defeated in 2545, ONI's thoughts returned to Erebus. A debacle, to be sure, but now it might finally prove useful. Turpolev had killed over a million soldiers in his surprise attack eight years earlier, and the UN was still stinging from the blow. While many called for the death of Turpolev and his rebels, ONI counseled something much, much worse: send them to Erebusâ€"put them into the hands of Stephen Thanatos. Happily, the UN agreed. Had they taken just a few minutes to pull Thanatos' file and take a fresh look, they would have noticed something rather glaring and extremely important: he was Turpolev's cousin.

Transporting the remaining two hundred thousand rebels to Erebus took several months. Once they arrived, over half of them were put through the "treatment" program. This time, however, the treatment wasn't designed to cause madness, but to transform them into wild, aggressive, fearless soldiers. Although the men did turn out to be somewhat insane, Thanatos had not intended it. Two months after the treatments were complete the "wild soldiers" overwhelmed the prison force, and handed rule of Erebus over to Turpolev. In the process, however, the prison gates were knocked down and over three million prisoners escaped.

If the city of Parnassus were a donut, the center would be the prison, while the donut itself would be the main city. A massive circle, the prison was over eight miles in diameter while the main of the city was three times that size. Turpolev had several million prisoners to deal with in a city covering over four hundred-fifty square miles. What was more, two in three of them were completely insane. Flying over the city with his top aide, Krasky, Turpolev had considered his options.

"Kill them, kill them all," Krasky had spoken coldly, with all the will and self-animation of a marionette. Tugging madly at the strings, Thanatos had filled the counselor's mouth with vile, murderous adviceâ€"and Turpolev listened. As the city of Parnassus passed solemnly outside the Pelican's window, its buildings

reflecting the pale red moon like tombstones dressed for Halloween, the rebel leader decided that slaughter was the only option, for sane and insane alike.

To save on their limited supply of ammunition, Thanatos proposed that the killing be done with knives, and Turpolev reluctantly agreed. What followed was twenty-seven days of brutal slaughter, followed by weeks of gathering and bulldozing. Twenty miles outside the city, two enormous mass graves loomed like eerie, dark lakes, so large that they could be viewed from space.

Life and freedom—the two things cherished by all evil men. Although murder comes as easily to them as spilling water, they feel that their own life is of great importance and should be sustained forever. By the same dark reasoning they cruelly trample the freedoms of others, never expecting to answer for their actions. In cherishing these, they embrace lies. All men die—rich or poor, strong or weak, good or evil; and all men face justice.

Erebus would not escape the rod of justice; in fact, judgement had already arrived.

\* \* \*

>Zeta2 Reticuli peeked over the western horizon, a burning half-opened eye. Shining behind them as the Pelican headed east, it spilled light over the countryside, carelessly turning shadows into soft, natural beauty. Looking out the window of the dropship, Chuckles shook his head, disgusted by the perverse contradiction. This was Erebus: beauty served only to mock.<p><p>

Turning away from the cockpit, he went to the rear of the Pelican and sat next to Lexicus. Still without a helmet, Lex's sandy-blond hair stood in stark contrast to his black MJOLNIR armor. Crouching down in front of them, Helljumper had spread the surface map out on the floor.

"You were a hundred miles west of Parnassus. Turpolev's madmen must have ran all night to get to your position." Looking up he smiled darkly. "It'll be a hundred degrees in the shade by noon. Augmented or not, we won't be seeing them again today. With any luck, that was most of them."

Kneeling next to the ODST, Chuckles looked at the map for a moment and then pointed to a massive, rectangular building. "Krasky said that Sagus and the container are in this installation. Let's hope they haven't been moved." All three warriors shook their heads in frustration. Incomplete or faulty intel was one of the most dangerous enemies a soldier faced—a fact all of them had learned the hard way. But, like before, they would have no other choice.

"Okay," Lexicus said, "we'll go in two teams. Once we're in, I want complete silence on the com. This used to be a UNSC installation, and they could be listening. Chuckles, you and the Captain will rescue Sagus. Me and Turp will retrieve the container." Sitting in the rear of the Pelican, Turpertrator nodded agreement. He had not moved or spoken since losing Xraf, who had been a good friend. While Helljumper wondered if the grieving soldier would be combat effective, the Spartans had no doubts.

Leaning in close and gesturing at Turper, Chuckles whispered into the Lex's ear. "Remember, when the fighting starts, \_get out of his way.\_"

\* \* \*

>On the southern end of Parnassus the forest came within a hundred meters of the low surrounding wall, and thus had been chosen as their insertion point. Nearing the city, Mike slowed, lowered the Pelican nimbly between the trees and landed. Turning to look at his team, he nearly laughed at the absurdity of their mission. They were assaulting a huge military base armed <em>only<em> with knives, and the ODSF Captain who had been sent to kill them was now part of their team. \_What's next? Flying monkeys?\_

"First sign of trouble," Lexicus told Mike with more than a little concern, "get out and get clear. Without this Pelican we're stuck in Hell for good."

Mike nodded. "Roger that. Good luck."

To their amazement, they found the walls unguarded, and once in the city they encountered no patrols. Almost beyond hope they made their way to the base, nearly a two-mile journey, without incidentâ€"only to find that \_it too\_ was unguarded. Lexicus was starting to believe that he was going to complete this op and get his remaining team out of Erebus in one piece. For the first time since sitting across from Ackerson and Kraft back on Earth, he was beginning to have hope that this awful mission would end well.

Unfortunately Lexicus was wrong: it would not end well. Not for him, not anyone.

\* \* \*

>Listening to Lieutenant Sandie Gordon's cool, professional explanation over the com, Captain Addy was dumbstruck. Although he had tried to imagine his attractive five foot three-inch XO pumping two bullets into Justin Timmer's brain, it was an impossible image to conjure. Tougher than nails, sure, but she was also a sweetheart who looked more like a daycare worker than a Lieutenant in the UNSC. What's more, she had reportedly done it to save Scott Carionâ€"to save a pig. Sitting alone in the wardroom, nursing an excellent cup of coffee, the Captain didn't think that it made a bit of sense. <em>Never can tell about some people.<em> Strange as it seemed, he had bigger things on his mind now than the death of his Weapons Officer, and he was grateful he had someone capable on the scene.

Suddenly the wardroom door opened, and Sandie, his lovely, angel-faced XO, walked in flanked by guards and holding a pistolâ€"still warm from the shooting of Lieutenant Timmer. Three guns pointed directly at the Captain's head.

She spoke, using the same professional, cold voice she had on the com. "Captain Addy, due to your complicity in the murder of Lieutenant Scott Carion, I am relieving you of duty, and you are being placed under arrest."

"You are \_WHAT!?!\_" His eyes burned and his fists clenched, but Addy

has been in tight situations before and knew not to resist. Not yet anyway.

"All questions will be answered to your satisfaction at your hearing, back on Earth." Then slowly putting away her weapon, she turned and spoke to the guards in a low voice. "He is to have absolutely no contact with the crew, is that understood?"

Without taking their eyes off of Addy, they answered in unison, "Yes Ma'am."

"Take him away." Turning her back to the prisoner, she left the room and headed for the bridge—her bridge—to assume command. Though undetected in her voice or facial expression, what she had done to the Captain had saddened her. Joseph Addy was a fine man and an excellent officer who didn't deserve to be framed for murder. Fact was, however, she had no other choice.

Operation POTLUCK was a go. Without the cruiser's nuclear arsenal, the pot would be empty.

\* \* \*

>Something was happening. Chuckles knew that they had been spotted by more than a dozen security cameras as they entered the base in broad daylight, yet they found no soldiers waiting for them. A warrior since childhood, he knew that nobody's luck was <em>that</em> good. Besides, he had a bad feeling about this mission, and he didn't know why. Throughout his entire life Chuckles had never known fear—but he felt it now. Like cold, icy fingers massaging the warmth from his heart, it chilled his resolve and, if only for a moment, his courage wavered. \_Not this; not now. For crying out loud, get a grip, Chuck.\_

A giant rectangle, the building was a mile wide and two miles long; its length running north and south. Having entered from the south, they had to move through the maze of hallways to the center of the complex. Using the information he had received from Krasky, Chuckles had programmed a rough map into his HUD. Passing through what looked like a reception area, they were about to round the corner into the first long hallway. With both of them creeping slowly and holding nothing but combat knives, the big Spartan imagined that if the security cameras \_were\_ manned, somebody was getting a good laugh.

"I know exactly where I'm going Captain," Chuckles whispered to the ODS, "so get on my tail and stay there because I'm not slowing down, or coming back for you." A consummate soldier, Helljumper understood, and agreed—the \_only\_ thing that mattered was completing the mission.

Suddenly, and almost to their relief, they heard voices. Chuckles peeked around the corner and saw six soldiers standing in a circle a few meters away. Smiling wide beneath his helmet and readying his huge combat knife, he felt like himself again. He didn't even warn Helljumper before flying around the corner—he wanted them all for himself.

"What the—" was all the first soldier uttered before a giant blur slashed his throat so deep that he was nearly decapitated. Without

hesitating, the blur spun, kicking soldier number two in the chest with such force that only a corpse hit the wall. Soldiers three and four grabbed for their pistolsâ€”but a single swing of the largestâ€”and lastâ€”combat knife they would ever see sent them to the floor, hemorrhaging loudly from their throats. A lethal backhand snapped the neck of soldier number five with a loud "crack!" and, only three seconds after it had begun, soldier number six found himself against the wall, his feet dangling three feet above the ground. Panicked eyes looked down at his dead and dying friends, and then back up at what could only be . . .

\_Oh my GOD!\_ "Cl-cl-cl-"

"Clown?" Chuckles said, slowly lowering his helmet so that the symbol painted above his visorâ€”the symbol that had caused hearts to fail, the symbol of the \_Clowns\_â€”was in plain view. Turning deathly white, the rebel nearly fainted. The huge hand closed tighter around his throat and Death spoke again. "What is happening here?"

"D-d-d-devil. Th-th-the D-Devil . . . "

Chuckles was in a hurry. "The Devil \_what?\_"

Eyes opening even wider, the rebel suddenly remembered that, yes, there was something even scarier than the Clowns. Somehow calmed by that fact, he continued. "They brought him here, locked in a freezer. But \_he escaped!\_ Walking invisible, killing, killing." Then, face twisted in horror, eyes darting, he spoke in a loud whisper. "He kills just like we did! \_Just like we did!\_ My God! We gutted them like animals . . . "

Confused, the big Spartan shook his head in frustration. "You mean the container is \_open?\_ What was in it?" Wide eyes blinked away tears, and lips moved noiselessly. Chuckles spoke again, his tone both threat and promise, "WHAT WAS IN IT?!"

"Death . . . fear." Then, looking up at his captor with the eyes of a frightened child, "The Devil."

Chuckles had heard enough. With a twist of his powerful hands, he snapped the soldier's neck as if it were no more than a twig and let the body fall to the floor. Turning around, he saw that Helljumper had already scavenged the bodies for weapons and ammunition.

"Hear that, Hell? The Devil's here. Ready to die?"

Tossing Chuckles one of the pistols, the ODST Captain slapped a clip into another and chambered a round. "No, but if the Devil really is bent on wasting these guys," he stuffed the weapon in his belt, and slapped a full clip into a second one, "he'd better find them before we do. Let's move!"

\* \* \*

>Entering the base from the north, Lexicus and Turpertrator were only a few hundred meters from their objective. At first glance it seemed deserted. Looking down a long hallway, they saw nothing, but advanced cautiously. With white walls, white ceilings and white, windowless doors the place looked like some filmmaker's depiction of



Heavenâ€"yet another irony on this God-forsaken planet.<p><p>

Walking in the lead, Turper suddenly raised his hand to signal a stop. He tapped his ear, and then pointed to a hallway that dead-ended into theirs a few meters ahead on the right. Lexicus heard it tooâ€"panicked screams and a growing thunder of footfalls. \_Too many footfalls.\_ With no other option, they waited, combat knives at the ready. Louder and nearer, the footsteps became thunder, the screams like cries of the damned. Fourteen soldiers rounded the corner, and in the moment of shock that followed, twenty-eight horrified eyes were staring at one thingâ€"the Clown symbol painted over Lexicus' visor.

They should have been looking at the other Spartan.

Stealth no longer an issue, Turpertrator crashed into the group like a reaper harvesting souls. Slashing his massive knife with inhuman power and skill, he penetrated body armor as if it were no more than leather. Several bolted away from the slaughter, only to find Lexicus blocking the path with his massive frameâ€"his knife just as willing to kill. In moments, the frenzy was over and the dead lay on the ground, their wounds adding to the thick, red puddle. Clean and bright white a few moments before, the hallway was now stained with blood, and littered with the slain. Alas, it no longer looked like Heaven.

They had destroyed an irony, but they did not celebrate. Pity. It would prove to be their only triumph this day and life is too short to ignore little victoriesâ€"far too short.

\* \* \*

>Sitting in a secure room deep within the base, Stephen Thanatos watched through security cameras as the Spartans annihilated his soldiers. Both teams were advancing virtually unhindered, and in moments they would reach their goals, although one team would find little more than an empty room. Ah, but it is the little things that make life worth living, and the "little more" that they would find would make all the difference.<p><p>

\_Krasky, you old fool! You were never much use. I knew you would tell them everythingâ€"I knew you were a coward. I counted on it!\_ But that was to be expectedâ€"he worked for Turpolev. And where was Thanatos' cowardly cousin now? Hiding in his home, surrounded by thick walls and crack troops.

His com beeped and blinked. "Yes?"

"We located their Pelican. We believe another Spartan is inside."

Thanatos smiled, making the wound on the right side of his head ache. "Good. Destroy it. Send whatever augmented troops we have left."

"Yes sir."

"And soldier," Thanatos added, reminding himself not to smile, "Make it messy. \_Very\_ messy."

\* \* \*

>Even though half a soldier's life is spent waiting, Mike had never gotten used to it. Guarding the ship for hours was extremely boring, and in his opinion boredom was scarier than an armed enemy.  
<em>Didn't even bring a book toâ€" <em>

BOOM!

Mike suddenly pitched forward in his seat as a rocket slammed into the rear of the Pelican. Immediately grabbing the controls, he tried to take off, but the engine was unresponsive. \_Crap!\_ Another rocket smashed through the windshield, barely missing the huge Spartan; detonating in the rear and showering him with thick chunks of glass. Laying on the floor as innumerable bullets hit the ship, creating a metallic symphony inside, Mike palmed his oversized, eighteen-inch combat knife. Chuckles had given it to him a few years before for his birthdayâ€"the only gift he had ever seen the Clown give to anyone.

Outside, the woods came alive with wild, screaming soldiers. Staring at the blade, filled with the peace of certain doom, Mike smiled. \_So much for boredom.\_ Jumping out of the broken window he landed in the frenzied crush of men, unafraid. Eight-feet tall, Mike towered over the men, a terrible, angry giant. More mythic hero than Spartan; his weapon more sword than knife, men of sane mind would have fled, looking upon him again only in evil dreams and nightmares.

Yes, but these men knew nothing of sanity. Mouths screaming, eyes burning, they surged into him like a rabid pack of wolves.

Of all the battles of Erebus, good and evil, fair and fixed, it was the most glorious and the most secret, since none that fought lived to tell. But in this, if only this, was Thanatos defied that day: for though he had ordered the desecration of Mike's body, the towering Spartan killed all that came, leaving none to fulfil the order. When he finally died, as much from exertion as from his wounds, over two hundred dead soldiers surrounded him, like trees blown down in a forest. Nobody heard them fall, nobody saw them fight.

Secret? Yes. But a glorious secret.

\* \* \*

>Lexicus was still stripping weapons from the corpses when Turper advanced towards the door. It was unguarded. Approaching and turning the doorknob, the Spartan was surprised to find it unlocked. Turpertrator pulled the door open, and his remarkable life came to a sudden end.<p><p>

Almost twenty meters behind, Lexicus saw a bright flash, and then \_nothing\_ as the explosion hurled him violently through the airâ€"slamming debris into his body at incredible speed and puncturing his armor. Landing headfirst, he crashed into the concrete with a thud, and then lay motionless as parts of the building rained down all around, burying him deep beneath the rubble.

\* \* \*

>Chuckles and Helljumper were within sight of Sagus' cell when they felt the building shake. Judging from the direction of the blast they both knew that something bad had happened to the other team. Be that as it may, it would at least serve as a distraction for their mission. Located in the middle of a very long hallway, the room was impossible to approach with any stealth. The cell door was nearly one hundred meters from the corner where they stood.<p><p>

"Okay, soldier," Helljumper said as they stood just around the corner of the hallway, "I'll wait here. If there's any trouble, I'll go ahead and use the com." The ODS'T smiled. "If it comes to that, it won't matter who's listening to us. Now GO!"

Sprinting like only a Spartan can, Chuckles covered the hundred meters almost instantly. Crashing into the steel door with the force of ten men, he tore it from its hinges and sent it flying against the far wall. Quickly spotting Sagus to his left, he momentarily froze.

\_My God.\_

Hanging from his wrists, emaciated and eyeless, the intelligence officer looked like an encyclopedia of torture. Wounds covered his body, and he had been recently stitched up in half a dozen places. Chuckles was repulsed.

Helljumper's voice crackled loudly in his helmet. "We have company!"

Chuckles rushed to the wall, tore the shackles free and grabbed the prisoner. Running out the door he saw rebels filling the hallway to the left and the sudden flash of gunfire. \_Time to run!\_ Using his huge frame he shielded Sagus like a mother holding a baby in a storm as bullets poured down the hallway like horizontal rain, smashing into the Spartan's thick armor.

Up ahead, Helljumper was emptying a clip into the advancing crowd, when to his horror, he saw multiple rocket-launchers being lifted. "RUN!" The ODS'T screamed. As Chuckles approached the corner, a rocket slammed into the floor behind him, knocking him off of his feet. Flying from his arms, Sagus hit the ground near Helljumper. Rushing forward, the ODS'T grabbed the wretch, pulling him towards the corner as lead smacked into the walls around them. Once Sagus was secure, Helljumper glanced back down the hallway.

\_Oh no!\_ "Chuckles! MOVE!"

As the Spartan attempted to stand, a rocket sizzled through the air, detonating on the wall to his right. Thrown like a rag-doll by the explosion, he crashed into the opposite wall so hard that he nearly went through it. Slowly falling out of the Spartan-shaped hole, he lay motionless. Soldiers raced down the hallway towards him, eager to confirm the kill. Suddenly stirring, Chuckles looked up and saw Helljumper waiting stubbornly for him by the corner. For an ODS'T, it just went against the grain to leave a man behind.

\_Fool!\_ "Run!" the Spartan yelled, "Get him out of here!  
\_GO!\_"

Using all of his strength, he forced himself up, each limb screaming

in pain. Turning towards the rebels and lowering his helmet, he made sure that they all got a good look at the Clown symbol above his visor. Then, screaming with a voice so poisonous and deadly that the soldiers almost stopped moving, he said, "Cowards! You want to kill a Clown?! Do you?!" Pulling out both pistols, his voice a bone-chilling mix of laughing and screaming, he yelled, "\_COME AND GET IT!\_"

Both guns firing, he charged into the mass of soldiers, laughing, yelling, taunting and killing. Scores fell, but their number was too great and he was eventually overwhelmed. With no less than a dozen rebels holding the wounded Spartan down, they ripped off his helmet and began smashing their weapons into his huge head, continuing long after the Clown, their mortal enemy, fell limp.

\* \* \*

>Later, how much later he didn't know, Chuckles woke up. His armor was gone, powerful restraints held his arms and legs down and the effects of some sort of sedative made his head impossibly heavy. A face appeared above him, one that he had never seen before. He did not like the face—he didn't like it at all. <p>"Hello, Chuckles. My name is Stephen Thanatos. Welcome to Hell."<p>

C.T. Clown

## 10. Tears of a Clown

\* \* \*

><strong>Ghosts of Erebus (part nine): Tears of a Clown<strong>

\* \* \*

>Slow, mournful chords resonated through Colonel Ackerson's office in minor key—a seemingly misplaced dirge meant only for a funeral. But as Loxias plucked the strings on his non-existent harp, he knew that each sad note was appropriate. His face darkened and he stared forward with unhappy eyes, so that even his golden hair seemed trapped in a shadow. Sometimes knowledge can be painful—even for an AI. Of course, Loxias was more than just a smart AI; he was also an extremely advanced <em>pattern recognition filter<em>—that is, he was a prophet.

Since he was dealing with humans, Loxias knew that a measure of uncertainty was always present in his predictions. Sometimes, however, he knew. Sometimes humans were all too predictable and this was one of those times. Ackerson would die today, and even though the Colonel was there in the room, Loxias could not warn him. Assigned to the ONI spook six months previous, the AI's predictions had proven consistently accurate—so accurate in fact that the Colonel quickly began to miss the hope that springs from uncertainty. Unable to bear up under the constant foreboding, Ackerson forbid Loxias to share any more of his predictions. Thus reduced to heavy-handed hints and musical cues, Loxias still did his best to protect the Colonel. But today he knew he would fail.

Looking up from his desk, Ackerson addressed the AI with disdain. "Are you capable of playing anything other than funeral music?" Abruptly, the music stopped.

Loxias looked hurt. "Yes sir, I am."

"Good, play it then. I've worked with a lot of AI's, but never one so depressing." Thinking his statement humorous, Ackerson chuckled. Loxias smiled weakly and began playing a livelier tune. Although the AI thought it strange that humans found comfort in ignorance, he could almost understand. Maybe he knew too much. Maybe that was the reason he continually played dark, minor keys. Unable to shield himself from his own predictive powers, Loxias knew nothing of hopeâ€"only foreboding.

Obviously pleased with the new tune, Ackerson began tapping his foot. Nodding his approval, he spoke kindly to the AI. "That's more like it. There may be a use for you yet." Loxias nodded back, and played as merrily as he could. After all, the Colonel would be dead in a few hoursâ€"funeral music would come soon enough.

\* \* \*

>Darkness had already fallen on Parnassus when Helljumper emerged from the city, carrying the unconscious intelligence officer. When he arrived at the rendezvous, a small clearing twenty meters behind the tree line, he could not believe his eyes. Hundreds of slaughtered rebels surrounded the wrecked Pelican, and judging from the smell, they had been there since early in the day. Laying Sagus down by a tree, the ODS'T Captain began looking for Mike. It did not take long.  
<p>Behind the ship, arms spread wide, the huge Spartan lay dead upon a small hillâ€"a hill of rebel corpses. Due to Mike's size, it took Helljumper's nearly half an hour to drag him into the woods. Finally finished, he stood over the body, panting from exhaustion. Remembering what he saw around the Pelican, the ODS'T was filled with unexpected emotion.<p>

"Soldier . . . I've . . . I've never seen anything like it." Shaking his head in disgust, he spoke bitterly. "You just wait there by the river, sonâ€"we'll be sending the rest of them along soon enough." Looking through the trees toward the city walls, he wondered what had happened to the other team; but more than anything he agonized over the fate of Chuckles. Helljumper had never left a man behind beforeâ€"living or dead. Although he knew he had made the right choice, being right did not make it any easier. But he was still an ODS'T Captain, and Spartans or not, he would not return to the Cerberus until every soldier was accounted forâ€"including his dead team of ODS'T's. He would bring back every man he had brought and every man he had fought with, and God help anyone who tried to stop him.

Suddenly hearing movement, Helljumper turned to see Sagus thrashing wildly on the ground. Rushing over, he held him gently on the cool grass, even as David tried to fight him. "Easy son. It's okay." Sagus was shaking uncontrollably and his mouth opened as if to screamâ€"but no sound came out. "You're safe now, Lieutenant. I'm not gonna let anybody else hurt you." Slowly the panic ebbed away, and the shaking stopped.

"Son, I know you've been through Hell, but I need information. Can you talk?" David did not answer. "Great." Without warning, Sagus grabbed Helljumper's head and pulled it down. With a voice thin as a shadow, he whispered into the ODS'T's ear.

"We have to move. \_It's coming\_."

"Coming? What's coming?" Helljumper pulled his head away and looked at Sagus' empty-eye sockets with confusion. "Son, I'd know if something was approaching. You need to rest forâ€"

Suddenly grabbing the ODS'T's head again, he yanked it down and whispered desperately. "\_IT is coming . . . the Devil! We move now!\_"

"The Devâ€" Before he could finish, Sagus stood painfully and began pulling Helljumper into the woods. Sick with fear, David wished he could shut it out, wished he had eyes to shut. Helljumper followed a moment, and then picked Sagus up and carried him. Before a minute had passed, David tapped his arm. Lowering his head, the ODS'T listened to the small voice.

"Gone. It is moving away from the city." Helljumper slowed to a walk, and turned back for the rendezvous point.

"It? What are you talking about? What is \_it?\_" Helljumper was about to lower his ear again, when he smelled somethingâ€"something awful. Finding Mike's body untouched, he put Sagus down and, quiet as a ghost, he moved through the woods, back to the Pelican. For the first time, he risked the use of his flashlight.

\_Oh my God.\_

The rebel corpsesâ€"every last one of themâ€"had been gutted, causing a suffocating stench. Reflexively covering his nose, Helljumper stared with disbelief. It would have taken hours to accomplishâ€"but it happened in the last few minutes. Suddenly he remembered the words of the soldier Chuckles questioned. \_"They brought him here, locked in a freezer. But he escaped! Walking invisible, killing, killing . . . He kills just like we did! Just like we did! My God! \*\*We gutted them like animals.\*\*"\_

Walking back into the woods, he knelt down by Sagus. "I need to know everything about the contents of that container. \_Everything.\_"

\* \* \*

>Chuckles flexed his arms and legs, carefully testing the strength of the restraints as he stared into the wrinkled, aged face of Stephen Thanatos. Lying face up on the cold metal table without his MJOLNIR armor, he felt surprisingly comfortable. Like the hallways, the entire room was bright white, causing the big Spartan to squint his eyes. <em>What is it with this place and white?<em> After the beating he had taken, Chuckles was thankful that his eyes would open at all.

"I must confess," Thanatos said, looking Chuckles straight in the face, "I have always wanted to meet you. When I saw the pictures of what you did in Afghanistan . . . wow. When it comes to cruelty, death and horror, I'm not an easy man to impress. But you painted quite a picture." The madman smiled with every tooth in his head. "I did some painting of my own earlier tonight with your dead friend Lexicus. Sort of a \_Clown\_ homage." Chuckles tensed, hoping it was a lie, but something in Thanatos' tone told him different. "I'd have

shown you a picture, but I'm afraid I overdid it. Probably not enough of him left."

\_Oh, you'll pay for that.\_ Moving his fingers and toes, Chuckles noted that his motor reflexes were a little sluggish, the obvious effects of sedation. Suddenly realizing that his head was not strapped, he looked around. Numerous instruments of torture sat on shelves to his left and right; some were shiny new, others ghosts of another age. More importantly he saw four rebels armed with shotguns—one in each corner of the small room. \_Doable\_. Testing his fingers and toes once more, he was pleased: the sluggishness was already wearing off. Thanatos continued, smiling like a child at Christmas.

"You should know something before we start." Stephen began to circle the table. "I do not need any information from you. I do not care what you know or do not know. Over the next several hours I am going to take you apart like a biology student examining a frog, and I will do it for the sheer enjoyment." With that, the madman stopped at the foot of the table.

If he was waiting to see fear in the Spartan's eyes, he was disappointed. No, the look on Chuckles' face was not fear, but rage, and that rage would soon have an outlet. Knowing that too much sedation would have kept the Spartan from feeling the full force of the torture, Thanatos had accidentally used too little. He would soon become a victim of his own cruelty.

Suddenly an expression spread across the Clown's face that was so horrible that the two soldiers facing him averted their gaze. Cold, perilous and startlingly wicked, it was the look of a demon about to feed, or a Fury preparing to deal joyful, bloody justice. Thanatos' heart momentarily forgot to beat as a chill crawled slowly up his spine.

"How does it feel, Stephen? \_How does it feel!\_" Thanatos stood like a statue, and the soldiers cringed. Something was \_very\_ wrong. "You're so fond of fear, do you like it now! \_ANSWER ME!\_" Chuckles waited a moment, but no answer came, and the would-be torturer turned his head. "Just like I thought, you can't take it." The Spartan began to speak slowly, enunciating like a kindergarten teacher. "Weak. Pitiful. Frail. Impotent . . . " Anger began to replace fear in Thanatos' eyes, but the Spartan only spoke louder. "Useless! Pathetic! Stupid! Senile! " All four guards stood uneasily as the confrontation continued; distracted, waiting for Thanatos' response.

\_Now or never.\_

With a loud \_crack!\_ Chuckles ripped his legs free and flipped backwards, his feet sailing over his head. The backward momentum snapped the restraints holding his arms, and he landed on his feet behind the bed.

"Shoot him!" Thanatos yelled, forgetting he was still in the middle of the room. Eight-gauge blasts filled the air but the Spartan was too fast. Ducking the shot from the soldier to his left, Chuckles spun and in a single motion yanked the gun from his hand and backhanded him into the wall. Dropping to a crouch, he made the other three miss, and fired two quick shots, dropping the soldiers in the

upper left and lower right corners. Now the gleaming metal bed lay between him and the last soldier on the other side of the room. Still crouched, he placed his right hand on the end of the bed, his left hand on the side and threw it forwardâ€”crushing the rebel against the wall and killing him instantly.

The fight took all of four seconds, and Thanatos had forgotten to run.

Leaping to his feet, Chuckles smashed his fist into Stephen's face, dropping the madman to the floor like a sack of wheat. Flipping him over, he jabbed the shotgun viciously into Thatatos' mouth, shattering his teeth. "You should know something before I pull this trigger," the Spartan said as a wicked smile spread across his face. "I don't need information from you. I don't care what you know or don't know. Over the next second or two I am going to take your filthy head apart with an eight-gauge slug, and I will do it for the sheer enjoyment." Remembering what had been done to David Sagus, Chuckles stopped. "On second thought, why hurry?"

Dropping the shotgun, the Spartan yanked Stephen off of the floor and threw him onto the table. "How many men did you have in the room when you tortured Sagus? Huh? Two, three? Well, I'm all by myself and," Chuckles grabbed a large surgical knife off of a shelf, "I'll even let you have a weapon. We'll take turns. You try to hurt me, and then I try to hurt you. You have the knife, I'll just use my bare hands." Thanatos spit broken teeth into Chuckles' face, and then swallowed a mouth full of blood before he could take a breath. He liked the taste.

Lashing out with the knife, he tried to cut the Clown's neck, but Chuckles grabbed his wrist instantly and held it like a vise.

"My turn." With precise cruelty, the Spartan plunged a finger into the side of Stephen's right eye, plucking it out whole, and tossing it on the floor.

"AHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"I bet that hurt," Chuckles laughed as Thanatos danced on the edge of hysterics. "How does it feel, Stephen? How do you like being tortured?" Out of his mind with pain, he was unable to answer. "Okay, your turn again."

Chuckles released his arm, and Stephen stabbed forward desperately, striking only air. The Clown laughed. "Oooh, I think he's angry! Use that anger Stephenâ€”God knows I am!" Striking out a second time, Chuckles smashed his huge fist into the old man's side, breaking ribs and puncturing a lung.

Thanatos tried to scream, but the air had been knocked out of him. Laying there, looking up at his enemy and momentarily unable to take a breath, he lost hope. All he could wish for was a quick death, but the Clown's eyes left no doubtâ€”he would die slowly.

"Your turn again." Thanatos didn't move. "Gonna pass? Fine, let's see if I can even out that eye situation for you."

Without warning a shotgun stock slammed into the side of Chuckles' head, dropping him to the floor. He tried to get up, but a second



blown landed in the middle of his already mangled face, knocking the Spartan out. Consumed with dealing out punishment, he had not heard the rebel soldier enter the room.

"Donth shoot him, tholdier!" Thanatos yelled, lisping due to his missing teeth. Standing painfully, he drew a wet, ragged breath and looked down at the fallen Clown. He smiled a toothless, almost comical grin. "No, I have thomething worth for him than death." Despite his pain, he laughed. "Yeth, much worth."

\* \* \*

>Finally waking far beneath the wreckage, Lexicus saw only darkness. <em>I've got to contact my team.</em> "Turper, can you hear me? Turper, you there?" The memory of what happened hit him suddenly, and he knew that Turpertrator would not answerâ€"not now, not ever. He had lost another soldier; another Spartan, and the thought made him ill.

The pale, red moon was full when he finally emerged from the wreckage. Although his MJOLNIR armor was ripped open in half a dozen places, Lexicus had suffered only a few lacerations. But that didn't matter to him one way or the other. For the first time in his extensive career as a Spartan, he had failed. He was sick of losing, sick of being outguessed and sick of counting bodies. Most of all, he was sick of this God-forsaken planet. Whatever was in the container, it was not worth the price they were payingâ€"especially considering that his team had been betrayed from the start. No, Lexicus was done here. He would meet up with Chuckles and anyone else who was still alive, and he would leave Erebus.

Making his way out of Parnassus in the middle of the night, Lexicus found the streets deserted. As he neared the rendezvous, Helljumper's voice crackled in his helmet. "Rendezvous has moved, watch for my signal." A light blinked in the trees about one hundred meters west of the old location. The ODS'T was waiting for him.

"How'd it go, soldier?"

Lexicus grimaced. "Turpertrator is dead, and the location of the container is still unknown. The room was booby-trapped."

"Yeah," the ODS'T said, nodding his head, "we felt the building shake." Suddenly Lexicus knew that something was wrong. Grabbing Helljumper's arm, he spoke with urgency.

"Where's Chuckles?"

The ODS'T Captain looked straight at him as he answered. "He didn't make it out."

"He's dead?"

"No, at least he wasn't when I last saw him."

Enraged, Lexicus grabbed Helljumper and lifted him off of the ground. "You filthy . . . \_YOU LEFT HIM BEHIND!\_" After all he had been through that day, the ODS'T was not about to be called a coward by anyoneâ€"Spartan or otherwise.

"Get your hands off me \_now!\_" Lexicus had never been angrier, but he put Helljumper down immediately: such was the power of the command. "Maybe you've forgotten, soldier, but we have a mission to accomplish down hereâ€"and that supersedes you, me, and your Spartan buddies!" Standing to his full height, and putting his face right up to Lex's visor he spoke in an icy voice. "That was the second time you grabbed me, Lexicusâ€"there won't be a third. I don't know if you've noticed, but there aren't too many of us left. If we don't work together, none of us are gonna make it off this rock."

Ever since he was old enough to shave, Helljumper had been leading men. He knew to keep quiet for a few minutes and let Lexicus calm down. The veteran ODST had experienced the guilt and pain of losing men under his command. Cruel fact was, the better leader, the worse the pain. After a couple of minutes, Helljumper continued.

"We retrieved Sagus." His face twisted in disgust. "Those animals sliced him up like a lab rat. I've seen more mercy from the Covenant. You know, Chuckles probably gave his life to save him."

Lexicus shook his head. "No, I wouldn't bet on it, that Clown won't kill easy. He'll show up. We'll wait here for a while before we leave."

"Lex, I'm afraid we're not going anywhere. Our Pelican was destroyed and . . . Mike was killed." Giving that a moment to sink in, the ODST continued. "Must have been over two hundred rebels lying dead around his body. Never seen anything like it."

\_Mike?\_ Too numb to form words, Lexicus merely dropped his chin to his chest. In his many years as a soldier, the Spartan had never felt more hopeless. Closing his eyes and trying to find the will to continue, he did not think he could sink any lower.

Unfortunately, he was wrong. Dead wrong.

\* \* \*

>The assassin was thorough by nature, which was fortunate: in his line of work the careless ended up dead. Although he had been killing people professionally for years, he had never taken a job like this. But he was not a picky person and even by his standards, this was quite a payday. Oh, his client was getting his money's worth, make no mistake about that. This job had a lot of little bells and whistles that added to his risk, and thus added to the price. <p>The risks were real, and not easily overcome. This client wanted him to deliver a message to the target, which meant that he had to do his killing face to face. He much preferred to be hundreds of meters away, looking through the scope of his custom sniper rifle. Much less risk that way. What was even harder to deal with was the fact that the target practically lived on a military base. Getting in and out would be tricky, although it helped that nobody knew what he looked like. Just one more soldier walking around the base. Just a young man, waiting to talk to an officer about this or that. He carried a gun, but hey, they <em>all<em> carried guns. They were soldiers, after all.

\_When will he get here?\_ After waiting for over an hour in the dark, he finally heard the doorknob turn. Walking in, the officer flipped on the light and sat at his desk. Stepping from behind the door, the

killer already had his gun out.

"Good evening. Working late tonight, sir?" Barely flinching at the sound of the voice behind him, the man turned around, his expression more of anger than fear. \_This guy doesn't startle easy.\_

"What theâ€"who \_are\_ you." His question asked, he calmly sat down in his chair.

"We'll get to that. First I have a message for you." The killer smiled, since he had agreed to smile at this point, in fact, he was able to charge a bit extra for it. He sat down on the chair in front of the desk and said, "You stepped on the wrong toes, Colonel Ackerson andâ€" Upon hearing his name, Ackerson suddenly thought he knew who this was.

"\_Wiley?\_"

The assassin only smiled wider.

Ackerson bought some time. "But \_I\_ hired you."

"Yeah, but Kraft called first, practically shoving money through the phone. Said to only do the job if you called in a hit on him. Turns out, you ordered your own death."

"But," Ackerson said, genuinely confused, "How did he know I would call?"

The assassin shrugged. "I don't know, maybe he has crystal ball. Doesn't matter to me."

Smiling like he had just heard a good joke, the Colonel slapped the desk, almost causing the killer to fire. "I have to hand it to you, Wiley, you fooled me. I always thought that you were more than a hired thug."

"Well thank yâ€"

"Turns out, I was wrong." Ackerson leaned forward, placing his hands on his desk. "You are just a dumb punk who gets his kicks killing for money. I've seen dozens of losers like you whoâ€" The Colonel had been nudging a picture frame towards edge of the desk as he talked. Finally it fell, and the glass shattered. Surprised, the killer glanced at the floor.

The instant the assassin's eyes moved, Ackerson sprung forward, throwing the desk into him and knocking the killer to the floor. Quickly stepping around the desk, he snatched the gun out of the assassin's hand. \_I can't believe it was that easy.\_ Making sure a round was chambered, he looked down into terrified eyes, and spoke as if he was talking to his secretary.

"You said you had a message for me. Let's have it."

"I'll tell you, but please don't kill me!" His voice was so desperate that the Colonel almost felt pity for him. "I'll kill Kraft for you . . . I'll do it for free!"

"Okay," Ackerson said, nodding, "that's a deal. Now what was the

message?"

"He just wanted you to know that he outsmarted you. That's it."

"You sure?"

"Yes, sir." The killer started to get up. "On your job, I'llâ€" Ackerson suddenly kicked him back to the floor, and drilled two shots into his chest. Ejecting the clip and tossing the gun back to its owner, he spoke softly.

"On second thought Wiley, you're fired."

With only seconds left to live, the killer looked up and smiled. "I \_never\_ saidâ€" he choked as blood began to flow out of his mouth, "that I . . . was Wiley."

Two hundred meters outside of the office window, on top of a building, Wiley watched through the powerful scope of his rifle as the skirmish came to an end, doubtless with the death of the man he had hired. \_Beautiful.\_ Although Wiley had planned on killing the idiot anyway, this was much less hassle. Not to mention the elegance of have his target do some of the dirty work. \_Time to finish the job.\_ Taking careful aim, he slowly squeezed the trigger, felt the weapon kick . . .

Another perfect kill.

\* \* \*

>"Lexicus? Do you read? Lexicus?" <p><em>Now way!<em>

"Rhinox, this is Lexicus. Good to hear your voice!" For the first time in almost twenty-four hours, he smiled.

"Roger that! Good to hear you too!" Suddenly Lex heard the sound of an approaching Pelican. "Don't shoot, Lexâ€"that's me coming." \_Finally some hope!\_ As the ship began to land, Lexicus saw someone approaching from the wall.

It was Chuckles.

"Chuck!" Lexicus called through his com, "Welcome back." No answer. "Chuck?" As Chuckles came closer, Lexicus saw that something was wrong. The usually graceful Spartan was stumbling towards them, sliding one foot on the ground continually. Rushing forward, Lex steadied him and pulled off his helmet.

\_What did they do to you, buddy?\_ Puffed, swollen, and covered with bleeding cuts, Chuckles' face was all but destroyed. "Hey, you okay? Speak to me." Lex was starting to have a \_very\_ bad feeling. "C'mon Chuck. Talk to me!"

"Peees . . . willmeeee . . ."

"What?" Chuckles was trying to speak, but his words made no sense, and his eyes showed little or no understandingâ€"as if he had gone mad. \_Oh my God.\_ As Lexicus suddenly understood what had happened, the shock nearly killed him. For the first time since childhood, tears filled his eyes. Reaching up, he removed his helmet so the

Clown could see his face.

Chuckles drifted further and further away, as chemicals flowed through his brain like an invading army, marring and destroying. In moments, he would be completely gone. Clumsy hands grabbed for Lexicus, pulling his head near him. "Pwaaa . . . pwees . . . " Finally, through sheer force of will, Chuckles formed his last sane thought. Looking straight into Lex's face, eyes burning with desperation, he said, "\_Kill\_ me Lex . . . please . . . k-kill me . . . pweese . . . pwaaa . . . " and again his eyes lost focus as madness took control permanently.

Pulling him close, tears streaming down his face, Lexicus spoke to his oldest, closest friend for the last time. "Goodbye Chuck. Goodbye." Slowly he took out his pistol, pointed it at Chuckles' head, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. The big Spartan dropped to the ground with a thud.

Walking over to Rhinox, Helljumper spoke quietly. "Were they close?" The Spartan could barely speak.

"You have no idea."

Lexicus turned around, and the ODST nearly took a step backward. His eyes were dead . . . and dangerous.

"Lexicus," Helljumper said, "We need to leave, and I mean \_now\_."

Gesturing towards Chuckles, Lexicus said, "Make sure he gets on the ship." Turning his head, he looked the ODST straight in the eye. "Don't leave him behind \_again\_."

"Lexicus!" the ODST plead, "What are you doing? There is \_nothing\_ left here. No container to retrieve, no more soldiers, nothing." Ignoring him, Lexicus began scavenging ammunition and weapons. Then putting on his helmet, he ran toward the wall, and with one great leap, he was on the other side.

Turning to Rhinox, Helljumper said, "What is he doing?"

Before he could reply, a voice cut through the air like the crack of thunder, and it was coming from the city.

"\_TURPOLEV!\_\_TURPOLEV!\_" It was Lexicus. He was going after Turpolev alone—and daring the entire city to stop him.

C.T. Clown

## 11. Beauty and the Beast

\*\* Ghosts of Erebus (part ten): Beauty and the Beast\*\*

\* \* \*

>"Marissa!" Sagus yelled, running through the maze of offices and labs. A scream of pure terror echoed through the corridors in response, nearer than before, and even more frightened. <em>Run!</em> Suddenly seeing the control room, David crashed through the door,

lunged for the control panel, and turned off every light in the complexâ€”plunging them into darkness but making the creature visible.

"AHHHH!" Marissa's voice pierced the air, full of fresh horror. "Oh God please! \_Davahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!\_"

Tearing through the hallway blind, running his hand along the wall, he found a door and dove into it. \_Not her! Please, not her!\_ Exiting through an opposite doorway, he saw a dark shadow moving several offices down, towards the lab. Impossibly black, it stood out easily in the normal darkness. Bouncing off walls and tripping over chairs, Sagus tried desperately to reach her before it was too late. He could not let Marissa dieâ€”not like this. Suddenly his foot caught on something and he fell forward, smashing his head into a wall. Bitter reality began to drift away, slowly replaced by bitter dreams.

Lieutenant David Sagus had arrived on the planet only twelve hours previous. ONI had sent the young intelligence officer to investigate a discovery that, if proved true, could change the course of the war. Because science had failed to produce material strong enough to repel plasma, the Covenant's main weapon, ONI had turned to nature for the answer. The \_Biological Shield Search Initiative\_, better known as BeSSI, had been operating below the radar since the early thirties. The program had one mission: to seek out life forms that were able to live in extreme heat. ONI had no illusionsâ€”BeSSI was the longest of longshots. But they also knew that unless the humans caught a break, the Covenant would eventually win the war.

In May of 2547, after fifteen years of fruitless searching, BeSSI finally had a promising lead. \_Cradle\_ was an Earth-sized terrestrial planet circling the star \_Delta Leonis\_. An almost non-existent atmosphere and an extremely slow rotation period (once every eleven months) meant that while one side of Cradle baked in temperatures of over five-hundred degrees Celsius, the other side could dip as low as minus three-hundred. When probes sent by BeSSI picked up movement on the hot side of the planet which was consistent with that of living creatures, a team was immediately dispatched. Five years later they sent word: they had somethingâ€”something unbelievable.

As he arrived at the facility on the surface of Cradle, Lieutenant Sagus was full of anticipation. Sent by ONI to confirm BeSSI's initial claims and return to Earth with evidence, David knew he could be witnessing the turning point of the war. At the very least, he would get a chance to return to Sol for the first time in six years; and the young intelligence officer ached to see Earth again. After all, who knew how long she would last? Entering the mobile complex, a massive facility the size of a city block, Sagus was dumbfounded. Although it looked like something alien from the outside, the inside looked no different than some of the buildings on Reach. He was standing in what looked like a small living room with clear glass walls. A tall, thin man in a white lab coat hurried through the door, and smiled warmly.

"Ah, Lieutenant, you're finally here." Reaching out and shaking his hand, he said, "I'm Dr. Tom Ickes, Project Leader. I can not tell you how good it is to see a fresh face." Looking into the man's hollow, weary eyes David remembered his other task on Cradleâ€”evaluating the mental health of the researchers. Five years on an isolated, distant

planet can wreak havoc on even the strongest minds.

"Thank you sir. Glad to be on solid ground. I hope the news is still good."

"Yes, yes," the scientist answered, nodding so emphatically that his straight, black hair bounced on his head. "In fact, we have a demonstration ready. You arrived just in time. The other seven are already waiting."

"Seven? I thought there were ten scientists in your group."

The smile vanished from Ickes' face. "Tragically, we lost two people this week to heart attacks."

\_Heart attacks?\_ Sagus knew that you had to be in nearly flawless physical condition to be considered for a BeSSI planetary research team. Losing two scientists in one week was reason to be concerned. "Don't you find that a bit strange, Doctor?"

Apparently insulted by the question, Ickes responded in the manner of an impatient teacher. "Lieutenant, we have been on this planet for over five years. This facility may seem large to you, but trust me, after a year you would know and hate every square inch of it. I'm surprised that we have lost only two. Now, if you would please follow me, the other scientists are waiting for us in the main laboratory."

Turning his back to Sagus, the scientist exited the room and headed down a hallway. In stark contrast to the offices, the doors and walls in the laboratory section were not glass, but thick slabs of Titanium-A. Dr. Ickes pushed a button on the wall and a door opened; swinging in like the entrance to a massive vault. The room was large with shiny walls and ceilings about three meters high. Inside, the scientists, six men and one woman, stood from their chairs. The woman was attractive with long, red hair: when she saw the Lieutenant, she nearly fell over.

"\_David?\_" Sagus froze.

"Marissa?" David stared, as if gazing at a ghost. "I can't believe it."

Dr. Ickes, obviously irritated by the delay, tried to move the reunion along. "So you two know each other?" David vividly remembered the six months of his adult life when he had \_not\_ been moving around constantly—the six months when he had almost gotten married.

"Yes," Marissa answered, glancing down at the ring on her finger, "we know each other." Raising her large, green eyes again, she looked at David. "They still got you running all over the galaxy, Lieutenant?"

Dropping his gaze to the floor, Sagus spoke softly. "Still." \_This is getting awkward.\_ He turned to face Ickes. "Sorry Doctor, please continue."

The scientist pushed a button and a video screen came to life on the wall. "This is live feed from the holding room," Ickes tapped the

wall beside the screen, "which is on the other side of half a meter of Titanium-A." Seeing that Sagus was sufficiently impressed, he went on. "The room is a five-meter cube capable of simulating temperatures equal to either side of Cradle. So, Lieutenant, what do you think?"

David stared at the screen, but saw nothing. "Impressive. Where is the specimen?" Ickes smiled, and then hit a button, turning the light off in the holding room. \_Now\_ he saw it.

What in theâ€

"Let me give you some background, Lieutenant."

"Yes," David said, unable to wrench his eyes from the screen, "I'd appreciate that."

They took their seats again as Ickes spoke. "From the beginning we had hoped to find one of the creatures on this side of the planetâ€preferably frozen. Nothing moves in the deep freeze on the dark side of Cradle, which makes our motion detectors useless. The sensors on our remote search units can detect the slightest anomaly in terrain." Chuckling in disgust, Ickes smiled cynically. "But since we have only fifty units to search an area equal to almost half of the surface of the Earth, you can see why it took us five years." The other scientists nodded and mumbled agreement.

"Ironically, it was an equipment failure that caused us to locate the creatures. Two months ago one the lights broke on one of the search units. As we were flying it back to the facility, we noticed that the landscape was pockmarked with inky-black spots that were visible in the dark. We investigated, and found that these were the frozen creatures. Unbelievably, they do not reflect light." Walking over to the screen, Ickes pointed at the blob in the middle of the dark room. "It is about a meter long and sixty centimeters thick. On the other side of the planet, however, they range from three to fifteen meters long, and two to eight meters thick. We keep the room at the same temperature as the cold side of Cradle. Once thawed, we have no idea of the creature's capabilities."

"Then you haven't tested it?"

"Once. It was a complete successâ€" For a moment Sagus thought he saw fear in Ickes' expression, but only for a moment. "â€but it grew after it was heated by the plasma we used to test it. When we brought it here it was less than half of that size." The scientist was quiet for a moment, and then continued. "Now we will test it again. Eddie, hit it with a burst." A short man with dark, brown hair got up from his seat and went to a control panel at the right of the display. Suddenly the video went bright, as a captured Covenant weapon was fired into the creature. Staring in complete awe, Sagus felt his pulse quicken. The plasma washed over the shape and then flowed off its surface like water.

"Once more, Ed." Another shot, and the same results. No penetration or damage from the plasma.

\_This is it.\_ David thought, \_This is what we have been looking for.\_



As the light from the plasma dissipated the creature again became visible, like a black void in spaceâ€”only something had changed. Staring at the screen, they were all silent, except for one scientist who muttered an expletive. It had grown again, at least tripling in size. More than that, \_it was now moving.\_

"Okay, Eddie," Ickes said, breaking the awful silence and startling the entire group, "Kill the screen, and lower the temperature."

"Butâ€”"

"Just \_do it\_ Ed.." Flashing a faint smile, Dr. Ickes addressed Sagus. "As you can see the plasma had no effect on the creature andâ€”"

"I wouldn't say that there was \_no\_ effect, Doctor." David Sagus had a backbone as strong as the titanium beneath his feet, and he was not about to let this scientist fast-talk him. "You \_did\_ see it grow, didn't you?"

Ickes' response was not friendly. "Yes, Lieutenant, I did."

"Good, Doctor. It seemed for a moment that you missed that. I suppose that you also saw it move?"

"What \_is\_ your point, Lieutenant?"

Rising from his chair, David looked Ickes straight in the eye. "You've been trying to cram sunshine down my throat since I've arrived, and I'm sick of it. Give me \_all\_ the facts, Doctorâ€”good and badâ€”or I'll appoint someone else Project Leader." Sagus turned his attention to Ed. "Dr. Kurt, why did you protest when asked to lower the temperature?"

Ickes stared at Ed, speaking volumes with his eyes. "Umm . . ."

David was starting to get upset. "Dr. Kurt, \_will\_ the temperature go any lower?"

"No," was the sheepish reply.

"So you aren't quite the liar that Tom is, are you?"

\_Snap!\_ Tossing aside the veneer of civility, Ickes charged over, shaking his fist in David's face. "Wait just a minute, you \_worthlessâ€”\_"

Having spent six years in Naval Special Forces before joining ONI, Sagus' response was automatic. Before the scientist knew what had happened, he was kissing the cold, metal wall with his arm was twisted painfully behind his back. "Consider yourself demoted, Doctor." Then whispering so that only Ickes could hear, he added, "Your stupidity has endangered everyone in this facility, including somebody that I care very much about. If you so much as poke your nose in my face again, I'll finish this fight. Got it?"

"Yes."

David released his grip, and the embarrassed scientist stormed out of the room. "Okay, Dr. Kurt, this is your project now. We need to talk, and I want Dr. Stanton to join us."

Ed looked confused. "Only Marissa? Why?"

"Because I know her and she won't lie to me." Dr. Kurt shook his head in disgust but held his tongue as Marissa came up beside Sagus.

"Well, boys, I'm starved so I suggest we have our discussion over dinner. C'mon," she said grabbing David's arm, "I'll take you to my favorite restaurantâ€"my treat."

Had the video screen been left on, rather than walking to dinner, they would have been running to the escape capsule. But the screen was off and few things are more comforting than ignorance. Behind the thick wall something was growing and coming to lifeâ€"something that was beyond the prodding and toying of men. \_Something evil.\_

Several minutes later they were sitting in what looked like a family rec room. A couch and two large, comfortable chairs surrounded a table with games stacked beneath itâ€"games the crew had gotten sick of years ago. Ed and Marissa sat on the couch and David sat in a chair on the other side of the table. Although Dr. Kurt was surprisingly good at small talk, getting useful information from the homesick scientist was like pumping water from a frozen well. While Ed was no liar, he could hardly help being biasedâ€"if this test was not accepted, there was no telling when he would leave Cradle. Thus, it was two hours into the conversation before David heard anything of interest.

"You heard about the supposed heart attacks, didn't you David?" That earned her a sharp glance from Dr. Kurt.

\_Thank you, Marissa.\_ "Yes, I have. It seemed a bit strange to me."

"It gets stranger." A shadow seemed to come over her face. "They both knew it was going to happen. They \_knew\_ that they were going to die. They told me."

Shaking his head vigorously, Dr. Kurt cut her off. "Marissa, we have been over that already. Weâ€"

"No," David said, silencing Ed with a hard glance, "I want to hear this. Marissa, they told you how they would die?"

"Uh huh, right down to the place we found them." Fear made her voice tremble. "They even told me what their faces would look likeâ€"eyes and mouth wide, like they were screaming. They said that they dreamt about it every night." Looking straight at Ed, she added, "It started the night after our first plasma test. I wish we had never brought those creatures aboard."

"\_Creatures?\_ You mean you have more than one?"

"Yes," Ed answered, "we have two. The one you saw, and another in a portable freezer."

"Okay." David decided to get right to the point. "Are you having any strange dreams, Dr. Kurt?"

Ed suddenly looked uncomfortable. "What do you expect? We've been stuck on this planet-sized yin-yang for over five years."

"You didn't answer my question."

"With all due respect, this conversation is getting extremely un-scientific. We are supposed to be discussing the possible uses of a creature that can actually repel plasma, but you would rather interpret dreams." Ed stood to his feet, as much to look down at Sagus as to leave. "Tom was losing his edge, Lieutenant. You were right to replace him, even with someone as unqualified as me. But don't take that to mean that I agree with you. This thing needs to be taken to Earth for study if we are going to have any chance of winning this warâ€"and you are wasting our time."

Sagus tried to soften his tone. "I understand Ed, butâ€"

"Sorry, Lieutenant, but I'm going to bed. Unless, of course, you're going to beat me up like you did Tom?"

This guy really is on the edge. "Okay, Dr. Kurt, I'll see you in the morning." Without a word, the scientist left the room and shut the door behind him. Finally alone, David looked deeply into Marissa's face for the first time, only then noticing how fatigued she was.

"Maybe you should get some rest, Marissa. You look exhausted."

Her eyes sparkled. "I really look that bad?"

David smiled. "I never said you looked bad, just tired." He shook his head. "I can't believe you are still wearing that ring."

"Oh, does that bother you, Lieutenant?"

"No, not a bit. It looks good on you."

"For your information," she lied, "it happens to come in very handy surrounded by lonely men, fifty-eight light-years from Earth. Now that they've seen you, I'll have to come up with a new story."

Sagus shrugged. "That's up to you, of course, but I like the old one . . . most of it anyway." It had been so long, and he had so many things to say to herâ€"most starting with "I'm sorry". But he had never seen her this tired and to continue the conversation, he reasoned, would be the height of selfishness. "You really do need to get some sleep, Marissa. It looks like you haven't had any rest in days."

Her smile melted away. "It's been almost two weeks."

"Two weeks? Why?"

"David, why is it you can see through everyone else so easily, but not me?" Tears began to form in the corners of her eyes, and a moment later Sagus understood.

"Dreams?"

She began crying softly, and it was more than David could take. Getting up from his chair, he sat on the couch next to herâ€”reflexively holding her head to his chest. Of all the women he had ever known, Marissa was the strongestâ€”both physically and mentally. Something had happened to her, something awful.

"I-Iâ€”" she stammered

"Shhh. Calm down, hon. It can wait." Without realizing it, he was stroking Marissa's long, red hair and kissing the top of her head, as if their six years of separation had been no more than a few days. After a couple of minutes she lifted her head and pulled away.

"You still have the touch," she said, wiping her face and smiling sadly. Near tears himself, David looked at the floor.

"Still."

"This doesn't make it any easier to say. It would be better if you didn't care." Tears began streaming down Marissa's face, but as David reached out to hold her, she pulled away. "My dreams are horrible, like Mark and Ted's" She shook her head back and forth, and began to tremble. "O-only w-w-worse."

\_Worse? What could be worse?\_ "What happens in your dreams?"

"My death."

David kept his voice calm. "Honey, I want you to tell me what happens."

"No!"

"I think that you need to talk about it."

"\_No!\_" She fell face down on the couch, crying even harder.

"Marissa, I am here to get information on this creature. If you think that these dreams have anything to do with it, I need to know."

Slowly sitting up, she wiped her face again and then nodded slightly. "Okay, you're right." She took a deep breath. "When I was only six I had a pet cat that got torn in half by a car. Afterwards I had nightmares where I was about to get killed the same way, but of course I woke up before it happened. It seems silly now, but it haunted me for years." Again, she took a deep breath. "Ever since the night that we first tested the creature, I have been having a similar dream . . . only now I see myself die . . . and . . . "

"And what?"

"And," her face wrinkled in pain, "and there is someoneâ€”something/I there with me, enjoying my death. I've never felt such hatred . . . such evil. Don't you see? I'm being taunted by

my greatest fear! Something or someone is . . . " her voice trailed off as she started crying harder. Slipping slowly into panic, Marissa began to shake her head, jerking it from side to side, causing her long hair to cling to her tear-moistened face. Again, David reached out to her, and this time she did not resist, but wept like a child in his arms.

"Shhhh." He whispered, holding her close, "I'm not going to let that happen to you, honey. I'm not going to let \_anything \_happen to you."

"Please, don't make any more promises." Twisting her head, she looked up at him with pleading, tear-stained eyes. "Stop talking and just hold me."

Late that night, David sat up, suddenly wide-awake. \_What a horrible dream.\_ His sheets and bedclothes were soaked in sweat, and his heart was racing. Nightmares were nothing new to the young intelligence officer, but this one had been so real that he still felt the pain, and could almost see the wounds. Nervously running his fingers through his hair, David tried to calm himself down. \_Just a dream, man. Just a dream.\_ Reaching over to turn on the light, he noticed somethingâ€"something he had seen before. A thick, red liquid was seeping under the door and forming a puddle by the entrance. Sagus already knew that it was bloodâ€"the blood of Dr. Tom Ickes. He also knew that the body on the other side of the door had been torn to pieces as if by a demon. This was the way his dream had begunâ€"this had been the beginning of the nightmare.

Within moments David was running down the hall barefoot, towards the lab.\_ Oh crap.\_ A hole had been burned through the titanium measuring at least three meters acrossâ€"and it led into the hallway. \_Marissa!\_ As he began to run towards her room, Sagus heard a hideous cry from somewhere in front of him, which gathered strength and horror as it echoed off of the cold, metal walls. Finally entering the living area, he saw door after door, melted clean throughâ€"all except Marissa's, which was flung open. As he stood at her doorway he suddenly felt an awful presence that paralyzed him with terror. He was now a child at Halloween, lost in a big, scary haunted houseâ€"only this one was real.

"David!"

Revived by the sound of Marissa's voice, Sagus yelled, "I'm here, by your room! Where are you!"

"David, help!" Spinning around in the hallway, Sagus tried to figure out what direction her voice was coming from, but it was seemingly coming from everywhere. He knew one thingâ€"she was not about to return to this part of the complex. Involuntarily muttering a prayer, he picked a direction and ran.

"Marissa!" Sagus yelled, running through the maze of offices and labs. A scream of pure terror echoed through the corridors in response, nearer than before, and even more frightened. \_Run!\_ Suddenly seeing the control room, David crashed through the door, lunged for the control panel, and turned off every light in the complexâ€"plunging them into darkness but making the creature visible.

"AHHHH!" Marissa's voice pierced the air, full of fresh horror. "Oh God please! \_Davahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"\_

Tearing through the hallway blind, running his hand along the wall, he found a door and dove into it. \_Not her! Please, not her!\_ Exiting through an opposite doorway, he saw a dark shadow moving several offices down, towards the lab. Impossibly black, it stood out easily in the normal darkness. Bouncing off walls and tripping over chairs, Sagus tried desperately to reach her before it was too late. He could not let Marissa die—"not like this. Suddenly his foot caught on something and he fell forward, smashing his head into a wall. Bitter reality began to drift away . . .

David's eyes darted in panic as he woke in total darkness. Remembering that he had been in an office, he found the desk and searched the drawers with his hands. Finding a flashlight, he clicked it on and swept the room. It was only then that he saw what he had tripped on earlier. Marissa lay dead on the floor—"exactly as she had dreamed. She was the only woman that David had ever loved, and he had failed her in every possible way. Kneeling down by her head, he ran his fingers through her hair one last time and wept. She had trusted him to protect her—"and she had died screaming his name.

\* \* \*

>Moments after the Pelican left the ground, Rhinox heard Sagus moving around in the back. Putting the controls on automatic, he went into the rear and found the poor wretch weeping; so hard in fact, that he had fallen off of the chair. As the Spartan lifted him, he saw something shiny fall out of David's tattered pocket. <em>An engagement ring? Oh, he has a sweetheart.</em>

Kneeling next to Sagus, Rhinox tried to comfort him. "Don't you worry, Lieutenant, we'll get you fixed up and back to your girl in no time. You have my word." Taking a moment, the Spartan thought about the horrors the intelligence officer had obviously endured at the hands of Thanaotos—"endured \_and\_ survived. \_Yes, that Lieutenant is made of some pretty tough stuff.\_ "Sir," Rhinox said as he tucked the ring back into David's pocket, "that is one lucky girl."

C.T. Clown

## 12. Ghosts of Erebus the conclusion Already De...

\*\* Ghosts of Erebus—"the conclusion—"Already Dead\*\*

Even the madmen would have thought it odd; bodies sitting on top of graves rather than below. But the madmen were no longer alive, so they paid it no mind. Carrion birds did not dwell on Erebus, and even if they had, they would not have gone near the slaughter. In fact, every animal within fifty miles was busy running in the \_opposite\_ direction. Carnage on a biblical scale, to be sure, but on Erebus it amounted to little more than a punctuation mark at the end of a twisted story. And so as the mass graves drank the blood of nearly one hundred \_thousand\_ madmen with dark satisfaction, nobody took notice of the slaying—"nobody except the slayer. Even that was only for a moment, for there was more work to be done. Twenty miles to the east the city of Parnassus was full of life, life that needed to end. Death was coming, and although dawn was only a few hours away, the

sun would rise on sightless eyes, and its light would be wasted on the dead.

\* \* \*

>It was after midnight and darkness still enveloped Parnassus like a black shroud; trapping the man-made light in a dim halo over the city. But it did little to dispel the blackness, and so it was in shadow that the crowds of loud, intoxicated soldiers danced in the streets, filling the air with smoke as they fired their guns in celebration. After all, celebration was in order: the Clowns, their most feared and deadly enemy, were finally dead. First had come the news that Lexicus had been blown to pieces by a bomb—and then it got even better. Moments earlier they had watched Chuckles stumble through the streets in wonderful humiliation, as the entire city cursed, cheered and mocked. Walking slowly with jerky, uneven movements and continually sliding one foot sideways on the ground, the Spartan-turned-madman looked like a drunk, a cripple, a clown—and the rebels loved it.

Turpolev loved it too. While Chuckles was bumbling his way out of the city, the rebel leader was tucked safely in his fortified home just north of the military installation. Sitting alone in his office he stared wistfully at two framed pictures that sat on his desk. Already half drunk, he lifted a glass of vodka in clumsy, unsure hands and gestured forward in a silent toast.

"Iosif and Anatoly, you may finally rest." Tears filled his eyes as he lowered the glass and sat it on the table beside the still, silent photos. Turpolev had always imagined that he would feel joy and relief once he had avenged his sons. Yet, as he sat in his large, luxurious office drinking to his victory, he felt no joy. Although he grieved deeply over the loss of his sons, the promise of future vengeance had driven him forward and given him purpose; making life bearable. But no more. Now without even revenge to shield him from his grief, the rebel leader was utterly alone, stripped of everything that connected him to his boys—stripped of everything that numbed his guilt-laden sorrow. While Turpolev toasted pictures, his two sons rotted in graves on a far distant planet.

\_Thank God for the vodka.\_

Wearily, he wiped tears from his face, grabbed his glass and dumped the contents down his throat. As he poured himself another cup of the clear, strong drink he suddenly found himself wishing that the Clowns were still alive—that it wasn't over. At that very moment about four miles south, Turpolev's alcohol-induced wish was about to come true: in fact, it had just entered the city.

Lexicus leapt over the wall unnoticed, landing in darkness on the other side. Standing just inside Parnassus, he saw thousands of soldiers dancing in the streets, loudly celebrating the death of his closest friend. Blood ran cold in his veins as the last of his humanity was pushed aside, replaced by the cold steel of his will. Almost involuntarily Lexicus raised his pistol, palmed a grenade and considered killing them—every worthless one of them—while they celebrated. But he had not come for mere soldiers, not yet anyway. One man was responsible for this entire mess and that man was going to die. Summoning all of his rage, Lexicus opened his mouth and let out a challenge that exploded into the night.

"Turpolev! Turpolev!"

Fueled by bottomless anger he stepped out of the darkness and into the crowds, daring the drunken rabble to get in his way. Cheering stopped as heads turned towards the cry and all eyes fell upon the large Spartan with the Clown symbol above his visor. At that moment, as the terrified rebels tried to reconcile what they were seeing with what they thought they knew, confusion spread through the streets like wildfire. Some thought it was Chuckles, others thought it was a third, unknown Clown, and there were even a few who believed the Clowns had returned from the dead. None dared move. If Thanatos' madness and a powerful bomb could not kill them, what \_could?\_

"Turpolev!" Lexicus lifted his challenge again and moved forward, steadily increasing his pace, eager to fight. But as he advanced the throng of heavily armed soldiers merely parted, giving him space to walk. The thought of such complete cowards mocking and jeering Chuckles was almost more than Lex could take without forgetting his goal and taking on the entire city. As he walked, he remembered something that CPO Mendez had drilled into his mind as a child: \_Although emotion is the enemy of planning, it can be the friend of execution.\_

Perfect. Execution was just what Lexicus had in mind.

\* \* \*

>"<em>Cerberus<em>, this is Rhinox. Repeat, \_Cerberus\_, this is Rhinox." Trying to contact the cruiser as the Pelican sped it's way upward, the Spartan suddenly wondered if anybody up there knew who he was.

"Rhinox, this is the \_Cerberus\_. Where are you?"

"I am inbound, piloting a Pelican. Be advised, I have Lieutenant Sagus aboard. I need to speak to the Captain."

"Rhinox, this is Lieutenant Sandie Gordon, and I am acting Captain of the \_Cerberus\_. Glad to hear about the Lieutenant. Did you also retrieve his cargo?"

\_Acting Captain? What happened to Addy?\_ Rhinox hesitated. \_Was there a mutiny?\_ Quickly deciding that, mutiny or not, there was nowhere else to land the dropship, he finally responded. "No, we were not able to retrieve the container."

Gordon's voice was grave. "Very well. What is your ETA?"

"Klank!"

Something bounced off the back of the Spartan's helmet. Rhinox turned around and saw Sagus on the floor, evidently searching for another object to throw. "Lieutenant, is something wrong?" Abruptly stopping his search, Sagus gestured for Rhinox to come closer. As the Spartan lowered his head, an urgent voice crackled in his helmet.

"I repeat: \_what is your ETA?\_"



"Just a moment, Captain." Sagus pulled his mouth close to the Spartan's helmet and whispered.

"Be careful . . . they will destroy it."

"Destroy \_what?\_"

"The city . . . protocol for BeSSI if anything is lost." Rhinox shook his head in confusion.

"Bessy?" Before he could ask Sagus what a "bessy" was, an irate female voice again filled his helmet.

"Soldier, tell me your ETA \_now!\_"

"Our ETA is . . . " Sagus mouthed the word "no" while waving his arms emphatically. Again, Rhinox lowered his head and listened to the faint whisper.

"Since we do not have the container, they \_will\_ destroy the city \_and\_ your friend. Do not talk to them. Once I am aboard they will launch a nuclear attack on Parnassus. \_Trust me\_. " Rhinox stood, and walked quickly to the front of the Pelican.

"Rhinox, respond!" The Spartan was silent for a moment, and then spoke in a firm voice.

"Captain, we'll get there when we get there. Out."

\* \* \*

>Sandie Gordon was livid. ONI had given her clear orders, and she had been moments from carrying them out when the Spartan contacted her. Now she would be delayed, and every moment she waited brought her closer to possible loss of command, and thus her ability to launch a nuclear strike. Sandie was nobody's foolâ€"she could read the looks she was getting from the crew. Captain Addy was renowned throughout the UNSC for taking care of those under his command, so it was no surprise that he was also very popular. What was more, they knewâ€"they <em>all<em> knewâ€"that Addy was no murderer. ONI backing or not, what she had done was mutiny, plain and simple; and once the rest of the crew caught on to that fact she would be lucky to escape with her life.

No matter. A BeSSI discovery was lost on that planetâ€"a \_rebel\_ planet no lessâ€"and that meant the population had to be reduced to zero: operation POTLUCK was extremely clear on that point. But while there was even a chance of recovering Lieutenant Sagus she could not risk a launch. Sandie punched her COM and raised the shuttle bay.

"This is the Captain. We have a Pelican inbound. Let me know the instant it arrives." The tone of the response made her mouth go dry.

"Aye, aye, \_Captain\_."

\* \* \*

>For the first time in his life Thanatos had felt fear. Not the fear a child feels in the dark, or afflicts teenagers before a first date. No, <em>this</em> was the sort of fear Stephen had always reserved for others, the kind that comes from knowingâ€”not \_thinking\_ but \_knowing\_â€”that you are going to be tortured to death; that you are going to die while screaming. He discovered that those little hairs on the back of your neck really do stand up and muscles really do refuse to move. He had learned something about pain too: it hurt \_a lot\_.

As he lay on the operating table awaiting emergency surgery, Thanatos could not help but feel lucky. Almost all of his teeth had been broken or knocked out, his right eye had been torn from its socket, one of his lungs had been punctured and his right ear had been bitten off the day before; but he was still alive and in his right mind. Looking down at him, the surgeon smiled politely.

"Dr. Thanatos, are you certain that you want to be awake for this?"

Trying to speak without front teeth made Stephen feel like an idiot. "Yeth, I am thertain." \_Make me talk again and I'll kill you.\_

"Very well, I'll be ready to start soon, however, there is a problem," the surgeon frowned slightly. "Most of the building has emptied out, and I can't do this alone. I have to go find someone to assist, which means that you will be alone for several minutes. Do you understand?"

Thanatos tried to nod, but the surgical drugs had now taken full effect, and he could not even move his neck. Silently vowing to kill this idiot at his earliest convenience, he spoke with great difficulty. "Yeth."

The doctor nodded and then walked quickly towards the doorway, "I'll try to be quick." With that he left, shutting the door behind him.

"AHHHHHHHHH!"

A terrible scream suddenly erupted from the other side of the doorway, followed by the sick snapping and cracking of bones. Thanatos instinctively tried to sit up, but nothing moved except those little hairs on the back of his neckâ€”\_they\_ were standing straight up. A body thudded to the floor outside the room, and an instant later the lights went out. Powerless to move anything but his eyes, Stephen tried to control himself and think. From deep inside an awful, twisted, nightmarish fear began to blow like a hurricane. A glow filled the room as the steel door melted and a great and terrible shadow moved silently to his side. It had no eyes that Thanatos could see, but he knew that it was looking at himâ€”looking \_into\_ him.

Then, as if a movie had started inside his head, he saw it. Stephen's greatest fear was to be left at the mercy of someone who would torture without pity; someone who actually \_enjoyed\_ itâ€”someone like himself. And now as he lay paralyzed and alone the Demon's thoughts flowed through his mind and he saw his death. But more than that, Stephen saw how much he was going to suffer. For what seemed like days Thanatos watched every inhuman act he had ever done

gleefully performed on him as he lay paralyzed and unable to even flinch. As adrenaline poured into his veins, Stephen's heart rate soared and sweat streamed off his skin, soaking the table. Finally the hideous vision faded.

It was time to begin.

Only bare white walls witnessed the torment and killing of Thanatos, but had they possessed eyes the walls would have shut them tight. For who can look intently upon the full measure of punishment, even when it is justly visited upon the evil. No, even the strong would shrink back in horror for suffering alone pays no debt and rights no wrongs; therefore the full weight of justice is as insatiable as a black hole.

Before it was over Thanatos actually prayed for death, which was the cruelest of ironies; for if anyone was listening to his plea and cared enough to help, then death would certainly bring no end to his pain.

\* \* \*

>"Turpolev!"<p><p>

Already within half a mile of the compound, Lexicus moved through the streets unchallenged, both amazed and angered at the cowardice of the rebels. Fear hung upon the city like thick fog, paralyzing the crowds; but that would not last forever. To his left was the squat, two mile long installation that he had attacked the day before, and to his right the buildings were tall and getting taller as he moved deeper into the city—"each one presenting a possible threat. A lone sniper could drop him easily, and Lexicus knew it. What he did not know was that the best sniper on Erebus was just getting into place a quarter mile ahead.

Although the sniper had never been on top of this particular building, it was the tallest structure in the area and he had guessed that there would be a nest on top. When the presence of two sniper rifles and a pile of ammunition confirmed his suspicion, he smiled. Quickly getting into position, he gazed through the scope, searching the street. There you are. The massive, armored Spartan moved through the city at a brisk pace while thousands of armed soldiers lined the streets, merely watching. "Cowards," the sniper muttered under his breath. As the Spartan passed directly beneath him, the soldier noticed movement near the compound—"meaningful movement.

Turpolev had finally heard the challenge and his elite troops were getting into place. An eight-foot solid metal wall topped with barbed wire surrounded his compound; which amounted to little more than a fortified mansion. From atop the building the soldier watched as four snipers peaked their rifles under the wire, and several others armed with everything from shotguns to rocket launchers, began moving slowly up the street. Well, its about time.

It was too much, and the sniper knew it. Unlike the regular rebels, the elite soldiers were quite willing to use their weapons, and once the first shot was fired the trance would be broken and every soldier in the city would attack the lone Spartan. Yeah, assaulting this compound alone was suicide. As Helljumper sighted in on his

first target, his lips curled into dark smile. \_Good thing he's not alone.\_

Now only a few hundred meters from the wall of the compound, Lexicus heard the crack of a rifle and saw a head explode just behind the wall. In the span of a second three more heads took a round through the brain, and the entire city came to life.

\_Finally.\_

Lexicus shot forward with incredible speed just as thousands of soldiers poured into the street to block himâ€”but he didn't slow down. With Chuckles' eighteen-inch knife in one hand and a pistol in the other Lex slammed into the rebels like a cannonball. Soldiers loomed deep as a sea before him, but his rage was deeper still and it flowed now unchecked. Moving quicker than the human eye could follow he ducked, slashed and shot his way through the rebels like an angel of death, instantly killing all in his path.

On top of the building Helljumper was firing just as quickly as he could reload, dropping one elite soldier after another. Suddenly seeing Lexicus in his scope, he froze. \_Oh my . . .\_ Although he had heard stories of Lex's exploits during the Bishkek Rebellion, this was the first time he had seen the Spartan fightâ€”and it took his breath away.

Continuing up the street with surprising speed, Lexicus cut through the crush of humanity with cruel vengeance, his eyes burning beneath his visor. Soldier after soldier fired at the lethal blur, each hitting either a fellow rebel or nothing at all. Suddenly, with one great leap, the Spartan somersaulted through the air, landing inside the wall of the compound. Thousands began to scale the wall, trying to follow, but Lex was not looking backâ€”he was too near his goal.

\* \* \*

>Warrant Officer Jimmy Doyle took guilty pleasure in his inactivity as the Pelican entered the shuttle bay and cycled through the air-lock. Sure, the mutinous Lieutenant Gordon had wanted to know the moment this Pelican arrived, but Doyle did not work for her, he worked for Captain Addy. The soldier watched as a huge figure emerged from the ship carrying what looked like an emaciated white corpse. But as the Spartan neared Jimmy was shocked to see the wasted figure moving. <p><em>My God, he's alive.<em> Doyle was still staring at Sagus when Rhinox began to speak.

"Soldier, I have to see the Captain \_now!\_"

"He's not in charge anyâ€”"

"I'm aware of that! Where \_is\_ he?" Rhinox was in a hurry.

"He's locked in the brig." Quickly putting Sagus into the soldier's arms, Rhinox spoke in a tone that made Jimmy's knees go weak.

"Do \_NOT\_ tell Lieutenant Gordon that we're here." Before the frightened soldier could respond, Rhinox had disappeared into the ship's interior.

Like all Spartans, Rhinox memorized the layout of any ship that he had to be on for more than an hour. Running with desperation, he reached the brig in just over a minute. Two guards stood in front of the door, staring uneasily at the huge figure.

There was no time for negotiation. Without hesitating, Rhinox struck both of them with a sweeping backhand, knocking them out. Taking one step back, he charged into the door; sending it flying from its hinges and scaring Captain Addy half to death. Looking up at the huge Spartan from his cell, Addy remembered Lexicus' threatâ€"that he would kill him if he ever returned to the ship.

"Lexicus?"

"No, Captain, Lexicus is still on Erebus." Working quickly, Rhinox tore the cell door open. Addy shrank back into the wall, still unsure of the Spartan's intentions.

"Soldier," the Captain said with sincerity, "I never wanted to cut you loose. That order came from way over my head." A look flashed across Addy's face that reminded Rhinox of Lexicusâ€"it was a look of rage. "Dealing with Turpolev turned my stomach, but I had no choice."

"We'll have to talk about that later, sir." Grabbing Addy's arm, Rhinox yanked him out of the cell and handed him a pistol. "I have reason to believe that Lieutenant Gordon is about to launch a nuclear strike on Parnassus while our men are still on the ground."

"How many men?"

"Two. Helljumper and Lexicus."

Addy thought for a moment and then shook his head slowly. "Well then, that's two too manyâ€"we're not leaving anyone behind. Where are the rest of them?"

Rhinox heard himself answer, but it still didn't seem real. "They're dead, sir."

The Captain froze. \_What have I done?\_ Then, pushing everything aside except the anger, he walked through the door and began stripping ammunition from the unconscious guards. "Gordon is no fool. We'll need more men to take back the bridge."

"With all due respect, sir," Rhinox said, feeding that last few cartridges into his shotgun and chambering a round, "I'm all the men you're going to need."

\* \* \*

>Lexicus shot across the lush green lawn towards the door as bullets whistled past his head and slammed into the ground by his feet. At first hundreds had tried to follow, but Helljumper was splattering the brains of anyone who got near the wall and the rebels soon lost all taste for climbing. <p>Slamming into the steel doors like a battering ram, Lexicus sent them flying from their hinges. Four soldiers had been waiting on the other side, but they had been too close. Three had died instantly, bludgeoned by the large, metal doors. The fourth, suddenly alone and laying eyes on the vengeful

Spartan for the very first time, was paralyzed with fear. Before the rebel could make his body move, Lexicus grabbed him by the neck and yanked him up to his visor.<p>

"Where \_is\_ he?" It was the voice of certain death.

"H-h-he is s-straight up the s-s-stairs."

"Right there?" Lexicus said, pointing.

"Y-yes." Eyes as wide as saucers, the trembling wretch waited, hoping for mercy. But the monster that held him was no longer a man, but a machine made of armor, muscle and bone. Less than an hour earlier he had fired a bullet into the ruined brain of his dearest friend. Mercy was a dead option.

Lex hurled the rebel up the steps and into the wooden doors, breaking them with a loud \_Crack!\_ Pausing only to grab a discarded shotgun, the massive Spartan cleared the stairs with a single leap; stepping over the dead soldier and into the ornate office.

\_Bingo!\_

Turpolev sat at his desk, armed only with an empty bottle of vodka. Tossing the huge desk aside as if it weighed nothing, Lexicus smashed the shotgun stock into the rebel leader's chest, shattering his breastbone like cheap glass and slamming him backwards into the wall. Rushing forward like a spirit, a reaperâ€"a Clown\_â€"he grabbed Chuckles' combat knife and plunged it into Turpolev's gut with the force of a jackhammer, shoving it up under his ribcage and stabbing his blackened heart. Quickly yanking off his MJOLNIR helmet, Lexicus lifted Turpolev upon the huge blade until they were face to face, and glared into his dying eyes with cold, unforgiving silence.

As he policed the compound wall with his rifle, Helljumper suddenly felt something that he had not experienced in more than twenty yearsâ€"he started to feel fear. Not the useful sort of fear that springs from common sense and keeps soldiers alive. No, this fear went from his head to his stomach, nearly paralyzing him. As he lay on his belly trying to figure out what was happening, he saw someone leaving Turpolev's mansion, and the ODST did not need his scope to figure out who it was.

Emerging from the doorway dragging Turpolev's body behind him by a leg, Lexicus headed towards the wall with impatience. On the other side tens of thousands of soldiers filled the streets, waiting to see what had happened in the compound. Slowly, like a poison cloud carried on a soft wind, an eerie, horrifying fear began to take hold of the rebels. Some of them had felt it before, but most had no idea.

With a powerful leap, Lexicus landed on top of the wall and lifted Turpolev's corpse like a grim trophy. As the crowds saw their slain leader illuminated in the dim lights near the compound, silence fell over the city. Looking down upon the rebels, Lexicus did not even try to control his rage. They too were to blame what had happened and he was going to kill themâ€"every last one of them. Taking a firm hold on Turpolev's leg, he spun him once over his head and hurled the corpse towards the crowdâ€"but it flew only three meters before it stopped, seemingly suspended in space. Cries of horror replaced the

silence as the body was ripped in two and then dumped into the crowd.

\_The creature had returned.\_

A powerful, violent blow suddenly knocked Lexicus off of his feet and into a street light sixty meters away; killing power to the lights around the wall. Looking up he saw a huge, inky black shadow moving towards him in the darkness as the rebels either ran away or lay paralyzed in fear. But Lexicus was not afraid, \_he was angry.\_ Leaping to his feet he ran straight for the creature, but as he was about to run into it, something reached out, stopping Lex and holding him still.

The Demon's most powerful weapon was the fear it found waiting in each of its victims. Manipulating those inner terrors allowed it to immobilize and kill on a large or small scale. It searched the Spartan's mind for any trace of fearâ€”but Lexicus had none to give.

A feeling, a thought invaded Lexicus' brain, crawling through his mind, and he could feel it's confusion, and even hear it speak. \_Why is it not afraid? Why does it not fear? Can it die?\_

Moving so suddenly that the creature was actually taken by surprise, Lexicus exploded out of its hold and screamed in a voice devoid of fear, but full of rage.

"I'M ALREADY DEAD! \_CAN YOU\_ \_DIE!\_"

Bringing up his weapon, he fired the shotgun into the creature so rapidly that the barrel began to glow. A shadowy appendage thrust into the dark to grab him, but Lexicus jumped to the side, grabbed Chuckles' huge knife and using both hands he brought it down on the dark arm, burying it deep. Like a sudden wind, the intruder in his brain rushed away, and the shadow jerked backwards, taking the knife with it. To the Demon this made no sense: kills were supposed to be easy, performed on victims paralyzed by fear.

But it had \_never\_ faced an opponent like Lexicus.

Watching the horrible scene from the building, Helljumper knew that this was the creature Sagus had saved him from. Unbelievably, Lexicus seemed to be putting up a fightâ€”but the hardened ODST did not expect that to last. Tearing his eyes away from the battle with great difficulty, he searched the area with his scope.

\_There!\_"

A Pelican was sitting just behind Turpolev's mansionâ€”and Helljumper had never seen a more beautiful sight. Standing to leave, he took a final look at the battle between Lex and the creatureâ€”and took off so fast that he nearly left his boots behind.

\* \* \*

>Sandie Gordon was too nervous to sit, so when the com next to the Captain's chair beeped, she had to lean over. <p>"Captain here."<p>

"Addy is heading toward the bridge with a Spartan!" She recognized the voice—"it was one of the guards she had placed outside the brigg.

\_A Spartan?\_ That meant Sagus was already aboard. With a gesture she sent two guards out into the hall, and then began to bark orders.

"Lieutenant Sisson, arm a \_Shiva\_ missile, and remove all safeties."

"Captain?"

"Just do it! Use the same coordinates as before." Gunfire erupted outside in the hallway, followed immediately by a painful scream.

"Shiva is armed, Captain." A shotgun blast impacted the door. "Safeties are removed."

\_Crack!\_

Sandie turned around and saw a powerful arm tear the door to pieces. A moment later Addy and Rhinox entered the doorway. Gordon's eyes met Addy's as she gave the order.

"Fire!"

Exploding from the entrance, Rhinox crossed the room in a single stride, knocked Gordon to the floor and leveled the shotgun at her head.

"Call off that missile, Lieutenant!" Addy screamed, his pistol pointed at the frightened officer. But the show of force was unnecessary—"they were all glad to have their Captain back.

Staring at the monster standing over her, Sandie barely found the courage to speak. "He can't. Nothing can stop the missile, the—" "

A huge boot came down on Gordon's neck and the barrel of a freshly fired shotgun pressed into her forehead, burning her skin. "You had better pray for a miracle, Lieutenant, because if Helljumper and Lexicus don't make it," he lifted the shotgun, cocking it loudly, "then neither do you—" \_I promise.\_"

\* \* \*

>The Demon sprung backwards, surprised by Lexicus' attack. Thinking that he had wounded the creature, Lex was about to attack again when he saw the knife he had stuck into it flash bright red and then melt; rolling off the shadowy arm onto the pavement below. In that moment Lexicus <em>knew<em> that he could not win. As he stared at the shiny puddle that used to be Chuckles' blade, he knew that he would die. He knew—" "

But he didn't care.

Abandoning all caution, Lexicus ran towards the black shadow and smashing his fist into it with all of his rage. The sound of the



impact echoed through the city like thunder as the monster staggered and fell. But before Lexicus could attack again, he was yanked off of his feet and slammed violently to the pavement. Thoughts invaded his mind as he lay stunned. \_You will die slowly. You will scream in pain.\_ Grabbing him again, the powerful black arm hurled him into the metal wall, nearly knocking him out. A voice spoke to him inside his helmet, but it was not the creature.

"Lexicus, can you hear me! Lexicus?"

The creature moved toward him slowly. \_I will burn you. I will watch you die.\_

"Helljumper?"

"Run towards the mansion \_NOW!\_"

Pain shot through his body as Lex stood. He could see the demon coming quickly towards him just before he leapt over the wall and began to run. With a roar, the Pelican rose up behind the house, and then swept down and across the lawn towards the Spartan.

Helljumper turned the ship sideways as he brought it within a meter of the ground. With the Demon so close that he could feel its heat on his back, Lexicus jumped into the Pelican, and slammed the door shut.

"Punch it!"

As the ship sped away, a hideous voice filled his brain. \_I will find you again. I will watch you die.\_ And then, like a chilled breeze, the thoughts left.

Turning upward as he gathered speed, Helljumper saw something exiting the atmosphere far above.

\_Oh my God!\_

"Strap in Lex!" The Spartan did just that, and not a moment too soon. Pushing the Pelican right to the edge of its endurance, Helljumper threw the engines wide open and began gobbling altitude. \_It was going to be close.\_ Shooting straight up they passed within a kilometer of the descending missileâ€causing the ODS to shudder. \_Come on baby, move!\_

\* \* \*

>Silence filled the bridge as Addy stared helplessly at the console. Three, two, one . . . and it was all over. A bright flash filled the display screen, and Parnassus was no more. The rookie Weapons Officer broke the silence. <p>"Detonation successful, sir."<p>

Addy looked down at Sisson with derision. "Thank you, Lieutenant, I noticed." Turning to his Communications Officer, he spoke calmly. "Okay Connie, see if anyone made it out."

"Yes, Captain."

As the officer tried to hail survivors, Rhinox stood over a very frightened Lieutenant Gordon. She glanced over at Addy, hoping that

he would do something to end this madness. Certainly he would not allow the Spartan to blow her head off right there on the bridge? But he did nothing. As Lieutenant Connie Kuchner repeatedly called out in vain, the Captain's face darkened and Sandie lost all hope. Finally, Kuchner looked at Addy and shook her head slowly.

"I'm sorry, sir."

Rhinox leveled the shotgun at Gordon's forehead with grim finality. Tears formed in her eyes as Sandie squeezed them shut in fear, but the Spartan was unmoved. "Goodbye, Lieutenant."

Her miracle came, without a moment to spare.

"\_Cerberus\_ this is Helljumper, do you read?"

The Captain smiled. "Helljumper, this is Addy. Thank God, we didn't think you made it." Fortunately, nobody on the bridge could see the look on the ODST's face.

"Yeah, right. Our ETA is ten minutes. Out."

Rhinox lifted the shotgun, and Sandie jumped to her feet, crying hysterically. It was finally over, and for the first time it really hit him—his brother Xraf was dead. The entire bridge watched in silence as the massive Spartan fell to one knee, pulled off his helmet and wept like a child.

\* \* \*

>Admiral Thomas Kraft sucked on the cigarette with sad desperation as the vehicle pulled up to the door. Admiral Bobby Denning, his superior, had left a terse message at his office. Something was <em>very</em> wrong, and that made Kraft nervous—and when he was nervous he smoked. A soldier opened his door, and Thomas stepped out, dropping the cigarette into the snow. It was a cold morning—in more ways than one.

Walking briskly into the building, Kraft hung his coat in the hallway and walked into the large office. Looking up from her desk, Denning's secretary regarded him with caution.

"You can go right in, Admiral."

\_Here goes.\_ Kraft entered, trying to look at ease. "You wanted to see me, sir?" Lifting his head from his desk, Denning stared at him with disgust.

"Do you remember why you were allowed to coordinate the Sagus rescue, Kraft?"

\_Oh no.\_ "Yes sir."

"Because you said you were friends, because he had looked up to you, because you felt an obligation, right!"

Kraft managed only a nod. Admiral Denning tossed a thick folder across the desk.

"Can you explain then why you two haven't even been on the same

planet together since Sagus was five?" Denning's eyes were burning with something worse than anger. Kraft started to protest, but the words died in his throat as he paged through the damning file.

"Where did you getâ€"

"That file? From your grossly misappropriated AI, Loxias. Tell me, \_Admiral\_ what was an experimental AI which was assigned to \_you\_ doing in an ONI office!" Too upset to stay in his seat, Denning stood as he continued. "Loxias sent me that entire file the moment before you decommissioned him. Among other things, the AI said that you had Ackerson killed!"

"Sir, that isâ€"

"\_Shut up and listen!\_ I haven't even got started with you!" Yanking the file from Kraft's hands, he pulled out a page and dangled it before Thomas's eyes like a poison snake. "Says here that you had over twenty conversations with Viktor Turpolev in the month preceding his surprise attack on the UN. \_Twenty!\_"

"Sir, I canâ€"

"And look at this!" Denning pulled out the transcript of one of their conversations, and Kraft's face lost all color.

"How did youâ€"

"What does it matter?" Looking down at Thomas, face red with fury, he spoke with hatred. "I lost two kids and a brother in that attack, Kraft! Over a \_million\_ UN soldiers were killed \_during\_ a training exercise!" Trying vainly to calm himself down, Denning returned to his chair.

"You will be formally brought up on charges before the day is out, so don't even \_consider\_ leaving the base. If it were up to me, you wouldn't leave this office alive." Denning pointed at the door. "Now get out!"

Hurrying out of the door and into the hallway, Kraft grabbed his coat. Numb with shock he went to the cafeteriaâ€"it was the only place he could think of going, since his office was not even on this base. Sitting down at a table alone he tried to sort out his emotions, and came up with only one thingâ€"\_he needed a cigarette.\_ He checked the pocket where they should have been, but they were gone. What \_else\_ could go wrong today?

"Hey, mind if I sit with you, sir?"

Kraft turned to see a soldier carrying a tray jam-packed with breakfast food. "Sure, why not."

"Thank you, sir."

"Please, call me Thomas."

"Thank you sir, uh, Thomas."

\_I'm not a knight, you imbecile.\_ He had just decided to ignore the

young?" "was he young?" "soldier, when he saw him pull out a cigarette. Gesturing towards the pack, he said, "Do you mind if I?"

"No, no," the soldier said with glee, "go right ahead."

"Thank you." Kraft snatched one of them from the pack as if it were pure gold, and quickly lit it. He'd be needing another cigarette shortly, so he decided to talk to the moron after all.

"So, what is your name, son?"

The soldier beamed with delight. "Tony, sir. Tony Meyers."

Kraft reached out and shook his hand, "Please, Tony, call me Thomas."

"Oh, sorry."

For some reason the admiral suddenly had the urge to pour his heart out to this soldier. \_Why not?\_ "So, Tony, do you think life is fair?"

"Sir?"

"Thomas, please."

"Sorry." Smiling weakly, he continued. "Well, yes, I guess I do."

Kraft chuckled. "Boy, you're in for a big letdown, because life \_is\_ not \_fair\_. You can work your tail off doing what is right, sacrifice everything to a cause that you believe in, and for what? So that someone can come along and destroy it \_and\_ you." He turned towards Tony. "And that is what they are going to do" "destroy me. But not until they've had their fun."

"Gosh, I'm sorry Thomas. Wow." Tony was quiet for a moment, and then spoke softly. "I guess all you can do is laugh."

"What?"

"Something that my dad, God rest his soul, used to say. When I was a kid he told me that if I was ever being tortured by an enemy that I should laugh as hard as I could. Mind you, this was back when we were fighting other men, and not heartless aliens, but" " "

"Heck of a thing to tell a kid." Kraft said, cutting the soldier off. "Why in the world would he tell you to laugh during torture?"

Tony answered, smiling like a fool. "Well, because one of two things is going to happen. If you are lucky it will make them mad and cause them to kill you quicker. I mean, that's a lot better than dying slow."

"And?"

"\_And\_ even if it doesn't make them kill you faster, it always feels good to laugh." Tony looked at him, smiling ear to ear.

Almost against his will, Kraft found himself smiling too. \_There might really be something to this. Why should I let these losers get me down? I shouldn't! No, I'll go down laughing!\_

"Thanks Tony, that really helped. Your father must have been very wise."

"Oh, thank you sir! I mean, Thomas. Glad to help." Glancing down at his watch, the soldier nearly jumped. "Holy cow, I gotta go!" As he stood, he shook Kraft's hand. "It has been an honor to meet you, Thomas. Good luck!"

"Thank you, son." \_What a nice fellow\_ Kraft thought as Tony walked away.

Once he had left the cafeteria, Tony, whose real name was Wiley, smiled with satisfaction. Within the hour the poison from the cigarette would do its work and Kraft would be dead. Heck, for all intents and purposes, he was \_already\_ dead. By the time anyone figured out why, Wiley would be gone, swallowed whole by blissful anonymity. Doing a job for a dead client was a first for him, and he found it quite amusing. Fact was, the money Ackerson had promised him to eliminate Kraft had appeared in his account the day \_after\_ Ackerson's death. Someone with a weird name had apparently authorized the transaction in the good Colonels stead. The name was \_so\_ strange that Wiley did not think that he would ever forget it. Seriously, what kind of parents would name a kid \_Loxias\_?

C.T. Clown

End  
file.